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AUSTIN FRIARS.

A Novel.

By MRS. J. H. RIDDELL,

AUTHOR OF "GEORGE GEITH," "CITY AND SUBURB," "TOO MUCH ALONE,"
ETC., ETC.

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AUSTIN FRIARS.

CHAPTER I.

A CITY INTERIOR.

WHERE the trains now go puffing in and out of the Cannon Street Terminus, there stood—before the recent changes which have made modern London almost unrecognisable to those who knew it when recent changes were undreamed of—a large house in a *cul-de-sac* called Scott's Yard.

Concerning who Scott may have been, and why he was considered worthy of having a Yard named after him, not merely general but local history is silent; yet that the place was where I have indicated, is certain from the fact that Scott's Yard still remains—a very ghost and spectre of its former self.

Gone is the ancient graveyard; gone are the best and largest of its houses.

Where the bones of the citizens crumbled into dust, cinders from innumerable engines now strew the ground. Where men and women had their homes, other men and women now crowd the railway platform.

The individualism of Scott's Yard has departed. The Quaker boarding-house, the lawyer's offices, the whilom Lord Mayor's chambers with their entrance in Turnwheel Lane, the few trees growing in the graveyard, the blackened unregarded monuments, the high iron railings, the parish ladders hung against the walls, the wretched patch of grass, the whole of Turnwheel Lane, are gone; and in lieu thereof, we behold, not a shady city nook, a quiet pool apart from the human torrent which sweeps through the neighbouring thoroughfares, but walls covered with advertising boards, and an unromantic glass roof covering a terminus from whence one can proceed to various places too numerous to mention.

Behold the locality !

Where the great City station and the great City hotel now are, there stood formerly a City bank and a City insurance company. Peace be to their memories !

Over their remains the trains sweep grandly in and out as a great lady of the olden time swept, in her magnificent selfishness, over all inferior feelings, loves, passions, regrets.

But what would you ? It is never out of the present, but always out of the "few years back," out of the joyous, out of the sorrowful, out of the irrevocable past that we romancers—true historians, though the people will not always believe us to be so—weave our tales ; for which reason I ask you, reader, dear reader, who have walked with me ere now over so many and many a mile of the city pavements, to forget all about the Cannon Street Terminus, and go back with me in spirit to the time when Scott's Yard was as quiet as Laurence Pountney Lane and Fen Court are still.

There were but few houses in Scott's Yard ; the

last one on the right-hand side, as a person entered the court from Bush Lane, was only No. 5, but this was a large, or at least apparently large, dwelling, with two windows on each side of the hall-door and one very wide window at the gable-end, which last overlooked the graveyard before mentioned.

This is the house I would ask you to enter with me ; and as we cross the threshold, I observe you look inquiringly at the names on the lintel. What do you make of them ?

Ground-floor :

LORENZO & Co.

First-floor :

JOHN MARKS N. LUCCA.

Second-floor :

A. FRIARS & Co.

There the record ends, and you turn inquiringly towards your guide.

The fact is, this story has nothing to do with Lorenzo & Co., or Marks, or Lucca, but only with

A. Friars, whose Company is a myth, and who really rents the entire house, sub-letting, at considerable pecuniary advantage to himself, the ground and first-floors of the said desirable premises.

On the night when you must, if you ever read these pages, make his acquaintance, he is not at home, but we will go up to his office and wait there for him.

“He is certain not to be late,” so another, who is waiting for him likewise, says to herself softly ; but will not proceed to the room occupied by this person till you have visited all the lower part of the house. You must know every nook and corner in it some day, so we may as well begin methodically.

As the front-door opens we enter a small hall, paved with diamond-shaped blocks of black and white marble. Immediately facing us is Lorenzo & Co.’s private office ; on our right is Lorenzo & Co.’s clerks’ office ; to the left is the staircase we must ascend, which really occupies a fourth of the

entire house, and is lighted on each floor except the ground by three windows. Until the respective offices of John Marks and N. Lucca are reached, the ascent is not very good; but from that point it widens into broad, easy steps, with heavy old-fashioned balustrades and curiously turned balusters.

Evidently the first portion, covered with lead, is new; though for what inscrutable purpose the original plan was changed, it is difficult to imagine.

In the hall to the left, on a line with the staircase, is a door opening on to a flight of steps that lead down to the kitchens, awful places below the level of the graveyard, and probably, indeed, built over a portion of it, where the moisture from the rank, foul earth outside makes its way within, and drips slowly down the walls—places where meat will not keep, where silver gets dulled, where myriads of small black flies—flies belonging to no honest and healthy breed—cover the dressers, and crawl over the improving miscellany of light and entertaining reading, adorned with numerous

exciting woodcuts, with which a wearied, purposeless-looking maid-servant is amusing herself.

The front-kitchen, in which she sits, the more cheerful of the two—not that kitchen like a vault, where the moisture drips down and the top of the window is on a level with the churchyard-walk—is clean enough; the covers hanging against the walls reflect back the bright firelight, the floor is free from grease or stain, the plates are all ranged tidily away, and the servant's work is clearly over for the night; whereupon we, having now made a sufficiently distinct plan of the house, will proceed upstairs, and, leaving the maid absorbed in the thrilling delights of "Rupert the Avenger," try to make the acquaintance of that maid's mistress.

She is in the office on the second-floor, you will be kind enough to observe; and after the first glance you withdraw your eyes, thinking this woman I have brought you into such regions to see not especially entitled to notice.

That at the first glance is your idea. You con-

sider a woman clad in sad-coloured garments, with but small pretensions to beauty—not old, yet still looking older than she really is—unworthy so special an introduction.

A sentence sums up your opinion. So be it. You will see plenty of her before this story is ended ; wherefore, take your choice now, friend. Leave her at this point, or else agree to hear of her to the end.

There is no gas in that room, but the light from a lamp falls down on her lovely face. Lovely—I speak advisedly, for I am writing now not as Yorke Friars impressed people at first sight, but as they came to regard her after weeks, months, years.

That face, bent down over her needlework, was grave almost beyond endurance ; it had a sad shadow over it, pitiful to behold on the countenance of one so young ; for Yorke Friars was still young, as we count age in a wife—barely seven-and-twenty.

She had her reasons, doubtless, for looking sad ; for, in the first place, she was often very lonely ;

further, she was clever—a curse to any woman not born in the purple, and who has frequently her way to push among utterly incompetent and inappreciative people; and last, but by no means least of all, she was loving, unselfish, devoted.

Are there not, in those three words, grouped thus together, the elements of a romance? She loved, she never thought of herself, she was devoted to another.

And that other? The needle came and went, and the busy thoughts flew out and returned with it; flew out to where he was, returned to where he should be.

What had she not borne for his sake, because she loved him—alas for her! since he was not worthy the love of any woman, whether saint or sinner. And yet with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his strength he loved Yorke Friars, who was as near a saint in those days as a sinner may be.

The women who exercise the greatest influence on men's lives are not, I take it, as a rule, beau-

tiful. Were this idea wrong, we should find nations subjugated and empires freed by the contour of a figure, by the perfection of a face; but this we know is not so; and by mere beauty, so far as beauty means regular features, pencilled eyebrows, raven or auburn tresses, and so forth, everyone who has any experience of the world is well aware that very little can be achieved, that few fates are marred, few destinies controlled.

When, passing through a portrait-gallery, we behold the celebrated beauties of bygone times,—the belles who made havoc not only with their own reputations, but also with the hearts of their admirers, the toasts to whom men drank deep in the strong wines that were affected in that more muscular age,—we cannot help marvelling where the charm lay, what it was which lit up those to us uninteresting features, that swayed kings, that bowed the hearts of warriors, that changed the counsels of statesmen, that brought about rebellions, and wrought all the romance of history.

For certainly, as a rule, these women—of whose

faces the painters have tried to preserve a record for posterity—are not handsome. No doubt there were much more perfect beauties in those days, concerning whom tradition says never a word, who wondered, as ladies wonder now, “what men can see in that creature with the large mouth, or in that other still more contemptible chit, who is little and insignificant, and who has not a solitary good feature in her face.”

True ; but then it was not in carved statues that the kings and their courtiers, the soldiers, the fops, and the statesmen delighted, but in flesh and blood that could beautify its features at will ; that had every variety of expression ; that could smile and be sad, be winning, cruel, desponding, exulting ; that could fascinate and repel, bring sorrow, and then repent over it.

Whether, however, this theory be correct or erroneous, it is quite certain that the woman whose life's story mingled with whatever was best and most pathetic in Austin Friars' experience could lay no claim to strict beauty.

In her girlhood no one found much to say in her favour save that she had nice eyes; but there are some people whose loveliness develops when that of others is on the wane; and so, in her womanhood, those who knew Yorke Friars best said she owned the “sweetest eyes were ever seen;” sweetest, tenderest, truest, saddest—eyes in which lay the shadow of a great trouble and a great repentance; eyes concerning the colour whereof no two persons agreed—shaded by long black lashes, that had been wet and heavy with tears shed because of the sorrow of her life; of the grief she tried, and tried successfully, to hide from the man who had been more to her than all the earth—for whose tardy return she is waiting when we first make her acquaintance.

After the fashion of the time, her hair was brought smoothly down on her forehead, and then gathered up into a knot behind—a large, thick knot of brown hair, with a ripple in it that proved, had she taken out the confining comb, it would have floated in soft flowing curls over her shoulders.

She wore it thus when a girl, when her life had still to be lived, when her lot had still to be chosen; and there was one who always remembered those tresses, unconfined as Norah Creina's, with a pain at his heart, the sharpness of which time could not dull, nor the years, as they came and went, relieve.

She was dressed in black—no one of the few people who then made up her little world had ever seen Yorke Friars save in mourning—and this sombre attire caused her unusual pallor to be more noticeable.

Time had been when a slight colour mantled in her face, but now there was not even a tinge of pink on her cheek, and yet she was perfectly healthy. Her paleness was not the result of sickness, but of long heart-struggles, of much confinement, of want of the strength-giving breezes that blew over the hills and dales of her country home.

Her hands, as they fell into her lap with the piece of needlework she held, looked as white as

camellia-leaves, and she had no rings save a gold one on the third finger of the left hand, and a keeper set round with small diamonds that sparkled in the lamplight.

She was delicately shaped, gracefully formed, and of that "just size" Queen Elizabeth extolled; which is, after all, perhaps the only perfection of height for a woman.

There is her sketch as Austin Friars would have made it—finished just in time, for, hearing his latchkey turn in the lock, she rose hastily, and went out on to the landing to meet him.

If he had not seen her bending over the balusters as he ascended the stairs, he would have imagined there must be something the matter, since, save during one long illness, Austin Friars never remembered a time when he had to open a door to discover her whereabouts. She always came to greet his return—to ask if he were tired, if he were cold, if he were vexed, if he had got wet. Through all the years they had never grown indifferent, never fallen into that state of conjugal

rudeness which makes a woman less courteous to her husband than she would be to a guest, which renders a man less civil to his wife than to the most casual of his acquaintance. Through the years they had never quarrelled, though the man's temper was none of the sweetest, and although, in her youth, dependents and friends had likened Yorke's fits of passion to thunderstorms. Through the years the words "mine" and "thine" had never been spoken in the sense of personal possession. They had worked together, struggled together, suffered together—this woman, whom you have seen seated by the fire, and Austin Friars, who slowly ascended the stairs, looking up at the sweet welcoming face of her he had loved so much if not so well.

"You are tired," she said, as, slipping her hand into his, they entered the room together. "Will you have any supper? Anne has not yet gone to bed."

"I seem only to have just finished dinner," he answered.

“Should you like a cup of tea?” was the next question.

“No,” he said; but immediately afterwards changed the “No” to “Yes,” adding, “I have a bad headache.”

She turned to go downstairs, but he detained her, asking, “Can you not ring the bell, and let Anne bring what you want?”

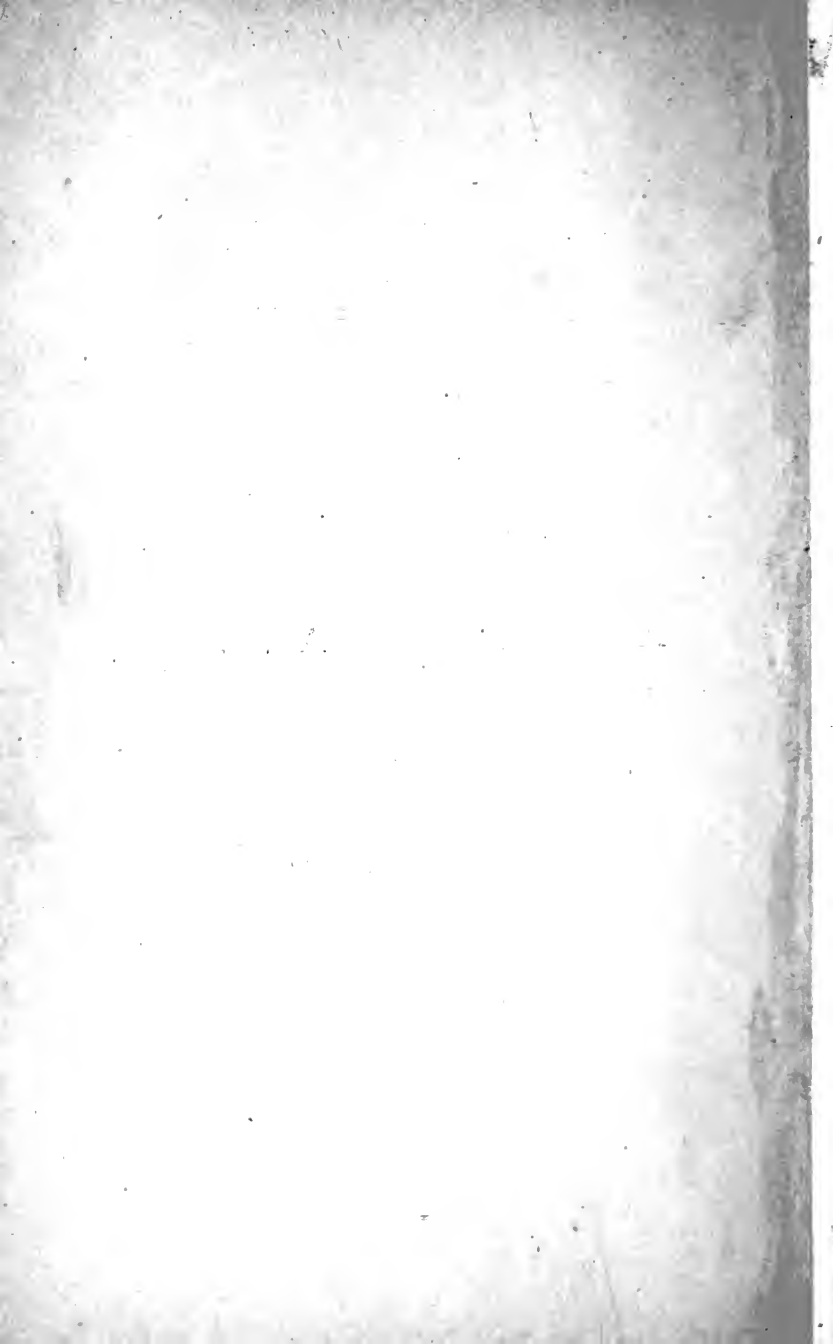
“My dear Austin,” she answered, “think of how many journeys Anne has up and down these stairs in the course of a day; and I am not an atom tired. Let me go; I shall be back in a moment; please let me go.”

He took his hand away from her arm, and with his eyes followed her as she left the room. Then he turned towards the fire, and looked moodily into it, thinking how he was to say what he had to say to her, what he was fully determined to say before he slept.

There is no accounting for women’s tastes, or for the sort of men they love. Certainly, even from a physiognomist’s point of view, Austin Friars did

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not seem worth the sacrifice of a life's hopes and prospects, though, as times go, he was a handsome individual, perfectly conscious of the fact.

His was the sort of appearance that fancies blue neckties and light clothing are becoming to it, that impresses the beholder with the idea of being excessively "glad of itself," that has always something to advance in its own favour, that is perfectly at ease concerning the impression it is likely to make, and that would be greatly surprised if any one ventured to suggest that it was not very distinguished indeed.

Owing to the colour of his hair, which was light, crisp, and curly, to his fair complexion, to the slightness of his figure and his studiously careful get-up, he looked several years younger than his actual age; and as he leaned against the chimney-piece, in orthodox evening costume—a costume that suited him much better than grey tweeds and splendid neckties—he must have seemed, even to the eyes of those who did not particularly admire his style of appearance, a very personable man.

Yorke Friars had always thought this, at all events ; which was so much the worse for her.

She returned almost immediately, a little out of breath with running upstairs ; and after saying, "Tea will be up directly," resumed her seat, and began asking him how he had enjoyed himself, if there were many people, and how Miss Monteith was dressed.

"She is very pretty, you say, Austin ?" she added, inquiringly.

And he answered,

"Very pretty, indeed ; and she wore a white dress trimmed with blue, and forget-me-nots in her hair, all of which were exceedingly becoming to her."

"And you really think Mr. Monteith intends to stand your friend ?" Yorke further inquired.

"I am sure he does," was the reply ; "but I will tell you all about it after I have had a cup of tea ; my head aches desperately."

If he had said his heart ached, he would have struck nearer the mark ; for an awful fight had

been going on there for many a day between his selfishness and his affection, between the worst part of him and the best, between his determination to go on his own way, and a feeling that his own way could not lead to happiness for himself, or aught save utter misery to Yorke.

It had been going on for months past, and yet Yorke was only cognisant of anything being amiss through the strange instinct which makes women feel misfortunes are approaching, though they may still be too distant to fling even a shadow before them.

But to-night the fight was over, the event decided, and Yorke had to be told all about it. If he could only have formed an idea as to how she would take the intelligence he meant to communicate, he felt the story might be more easily repeated; but Yorke to him still remained an enigma, and the only thing of which he felt certain was, that she would not receive his news after the fashion of any other woman.

Would the passion he knew lay under her quiet

manner break out at last? Would she be very angry, very indignant, at first, and then fall into his plan ultimately? The man hoped it might be thus, for she had loved him so long, and she loved him so much.

“She cannot change all that in a moment,” he thought, looking at her face speculatively. “I could not;” which last mental assertion only went to prove that the two were of very different natures indeed.

“I am afraid something has annoyed you,” Yorke said, after a few minutes’ silence. “What is it?”

“I will tell you presently,” he said; and he drank his tea, and then went to his table to see what letters had arrived by the evening’s post, and afterwards proceeded downstairs to look that the house was properly fastened up, while Yorke waited patiently for some blow which she felt was coming.

When she heard him slowly re-ascending the stairs, unconsciously she put out her hand, as if to

thrust something back which she beheld approaching ; then, as he entered the room, she knit her fingers together, and, looking inquiringly towards him, listened to hear what he might have to say.

CHAPTER II.

MR. FRIARS EXPLAINS.

“FOR some time past I have been thinking about our position,” Mr. Friars began, at which point he hesitated and stopped ; having arrived at a conversational stile, he thought Yorke might probably help him over.

But Yorke did not even make the attempt ; she only sat still, with her fingers twined together, looking at him, and accordingly he had to try back.

“For some time past I have been thinking about our position,” he repeated.

“Excuse me for one moment,” Yorke here interrupted ; “but do you mean *our* position, or *your* position ?”

“Have they ever been separate?” he enquired.

“They may become so,” she replied.

“Through all the years during the course of which we have been so happy together, have our interests ever proved other than identical?” he persisted.

“I can answer for myself ‘No,’” she said; “but in the years to come they may fail to be so, for all that.”

“It is impossible for me to imagine the arrival of such a time,” he declared.

“Well, we need not talk any more about that,” she impatiently suggested. “What is it you have to tell me?”

“You know how we are situated, Yorke,” he answered; “you know for how long a time it has been a struggle for bare life; you know what a fight from day to day I have had to make in order to keep a roof over our heads; you know that but for the help Mr. Monteith has given me I could not have held on even until now; you know how hopeless our position is—how impossible it seems that,

without substantial assistance, I should make a better thing of it.”

“I thought Mr. Monteith was going to give you that assistance?” she said.

“He is; he proposes to take me into partnership, and suggests that we shall throw the two businesses into one.”

“And do you like the arrangement so well as having the money to carry out your own plans in your own way? I thought you had a great objection to having a partner?”

“So I had; but, in the first place, a beggar can scarcely be a chooser, and, in the next, there is a great difference between taking a partner into a struggling business, and being taken as a partner into a great concern like that of Monteith’s.”

“And why does Mr. Monteith want a partner?”

“He is getting old—his health is bad; he wishes to retire from the active part of the business; besides which—as nowadays people are not in the habit of doing something for nothing—there is a condition attached to the proposal.”

“What is that condition?”

“First tell me your opinion about the partnership?”

“I cannot give one till I know the price you are to pay for all these good things.”

“Will you not help me at all, Yorke?” he said.

“Will you not make what I have to say less hard even by a single word? You have an idea of the price required, and yet still you will not even ask me if your idea be correct.”

He rose as he spoke, and stood leaning back against the chimney-piece, with his hands stretched out towards Yorke, who never moved, but answered, while her fingers locked themselves more tightly together:

“We have not to do with ideas now, Austin, but with facts. What is the price required?”

“Marriage.”

“You are to marry Miss Monteith?”

“Yes. O Yorke, my darling!”

She pushed him back, and in a moment recovered herself. At that instant, if there were

any one feeling standing apart from its fellows in the man's heart, it was that of relief.

She had got her blow, and was neither lying in a swoon, nor crying aloud because of her agony. Just at the first he thought she was going to faint, and stepped forward to catch her; but Yorke Friars was made of sterner stuff, and now sat quietly bearing her pain.

It was in the woman's nature to endure—it is in the nature of most women, who have also the capacity to struggle; and he who had stabbed her now waited silently for her first comment on his experiment.

At length, wearied of waiting, he said :

“It need not make any difference to us, need it?”

She put his question aside as she had put him, and resuming her former attitude, inquired, as though she had not heard his remark :

“Did Mr. Monteith make it a condition of your partnership that you were to marry his daughter?”

“What does it signify how we put the matter?”

he answered ; “ it is a condition, and there is an end of it.”

“ Hardly,” was the reply, “ so far as I am concerned. I feel quite confident Mr. Monteith would not force his daughter on any man’s acceptance. According to your account, she is young enough, pretty enough, rich enough to marry almost when and whom she pleases. What is the English of this transaction, Austin? You may as well be frank with me, for it cannot serve your purpose now to be otherwise.”

“ You are very hard, Yorke,” he pleaded, “ and far too plain to be pleasant ; but if you will have the story put into English, as you call it, Mary Monteith is very fond of me, and her father knows—is aware of her preference.”

“ And she fell in love with you without any sign on your part?” said Yorke Friars. “ Austin, I do not believe you. For a long time past I have known you for what you are ; but I went on trusting and excusing, because I believed that, if false to all the rest of the world, you were true to me.”

“And so I have been,” he interposed eagerly ;
“God knows, Yorke—”

“Do not bring His name into this business,” she said ; “I will not have it.”

“You know, Yorke, I would have married you, if I could.”

“I know it,” she replied ; “I believe you loved me well enough even for that—even to marry a woman without money, name, connection, or influence ; and that, Austin, is saying a great deal for you.”

“Then what would you have, Yorke ?” he answered eagerly ; “I cannot marry you, and we are on the brink of ruin ; but I can marry another, who will give me the means of supporting you as I desire, and of relieving me from the continual harass which is killing me.”

“I ought to have thought of all this before,” she said bitterly.

“The arrangement will give me everything I want,” he went on ; “and it need make no difference to us,” he repeated, while his voice sank a tone lower.

Then she got up.

“Austin Friars,” she began, “I have loved you as few women are capable of loving any man ; and through poverty, through sickness, through all time, I could have loved you to the end ; but now I hate you. Do you understand ? I hate you—not because you have left me without name, hope, character—not because you have deserted me for the sake of one younger, prettier, happier than myself ; but because you are a villain—a base, calculating, mercenary villain.”

“But, Yorke, dearest Yorke—”

“Don’t dare, sir,” she interrupted, “ever to address a word of affection to me again. It is all gone and past ; it is all over between us ; from henceforth we shall be greater strangers to one another than was the case the day we first met. Whatever cause Miss Monteith may find to regret her marriage shall not be given by me. May I ask who Mr. Monteith thinks I am ? He can scarcely, I imagine, be aware of my actual position.”

"He believes you to be my sister-in-law."

"Oh!" she said. And there ensued an ominous silence, which was broken by Mr. Friars, who commenced :

"I have been candid with you."

"Yes," she finished, "and you wish me to be candid with you. What you wish to know is, shall I go to Mr. Monteith and make mischief? Shall I go to the girl, and tell her how it has been with you and me? I shall do neither; so far as I am concerned, your life is before you, without a past, to do with it what you like."

"But, Yorke, without you I cannot live."

"You have elected to live without me," she answered, "and must abide by that decision. From to-night I am as one dead to you—as one who has never been."

"Is not my punishment too heavy?" he said, faintly; but at the words she looked in his face and laughed.

"You mean, is not your relief too great. You came home to-night not knowing how I might

take this—not feeling sure whether I might not, in my woman's ignorance, consider it my woman's duty to go to Mr. Monteith, and say, 'Sir, in the eyes of God I have been for years wife to this man, who would now leave me and marry your child.'”

“Have I not told you before that, had the thing been possible, I would have married you?” he cried.

“My memory is not so short but that I remember you offered to marry me before you knew there was any obstacle in the way. Perhaps also you remember that it was only when you were in trouble I——But it does not matter. Take back your freedom, Austin, and make a better use of it than you have done of all your other opportunities since we have been together.”

“You speak as though my misfortunes had been of my own seeking,” he said.

“They have been of your own finding, at any rate,” was the reply.

“All the time we have lived happily together I never heard you so bitter before,” he remarked.

“Because all that time I never knew you before,” she answered. “I now understand you were waiting for some one to bring you the fortune you ought to have made for yourself. I never comprehended it was through wanting to do so much that you achieved so little; never saw without a glamour between you and me,—Austin.”

There was a pathos in the way she uttered his name—such as a true musician flings into the last note of a plaintive melody; and that pathos disarmed the man’s anger.

“You do not understand, Yorke,” he said, sadly; “you cannot guess how difficult it is for people without capital to make their way in the world nowadays. My darling, I have borne the struggle till I could endure it no longer—till, even for your sake, I felt something must be done to end it.”

“You have proposed for Miss Monteith?”

He did not answer her question direct; he only said, “You have me at an advantage now, Yorke, and I must bear whatever you like to say to me.”

"Then I will say nothing more," she replied; "for if I talked for a year, it could undo neither our past nor what you have told me to-night. It is all over, all ended, and I can only hope that your future may be more happy than mine is likely to be."

"But, Yorke, why need we be different to one another? Is it not possible—"

"Have I not told you it is impossible?" she flashed out on him. "Two hours ago it was Austin Friars I loved—a sinner like myself, it might be, but still a man tender-hearted—faithful, as I imagined—erring but in one particular, the burden of which we were willing to carry together. Now, the man I despise is a black-souled villain, whom I this night utterly renounce, and whose memory I will strive to forget."

"You cannot do that," he said. "If you love me at all as I love you—"

"Love!" she repeated, scornfully. "If you had been honest, if you had had a spark of manly feeling left in you, instead of temporising with

me as you are doing, you would have come home, knowing what I am, and said, ‘Yorke, I have made a mistake; it is time we parted. I have seen one I love better than I ever did you; a girl between whom and myself there is no bar to marriage; say good-bye to me, for I can act a hypocrite’s part no longer.’ I should then have respected you, Austin, as much as I now despise you.”

“But it is not true,” he cried; “I love you more now than I can ever love this girl.”

“Then my contempt for you is deeper, if that be possible,” she answered; “you are selling yourself, you are parting with me, you are deluding this girl, simply for the sake of bettering yourself in the world. Oh, Austin, you have often told me you were a self-made man; and I am glad now to believe you, and to feel that God has had no hand in making you what you are; otherwise my faith in Him, the last remaining hope of my life, might be shaken.”

“This is merely a woman’s folly,” he replied,

angrily ; “ you could not expect me, Yorke, to go on thus year after year, debarred from every social advantage, from every chance of advancing myself, struggling with poverty, the best time of my life passing away and no good accruing either to you or to myself from the sacrifice. Are you reasonable ? I only ask you, are you reasonable ? ”

“ I am natural, at any rate,” she said ; “ but do not mistake me, Austin ; it is not that I feel you were bound to stay with me for ever, that I have not looked forward to the time when all my life with you might be but a thing of the past ; it is not that : it is—O, Lord, help me !—my heart is broken.”

And she burst into a passion of tears ; while the man caught and held her to him as he knew that through all the years to come he might never hold a woman again.

“ My darling, my own only love ! ”—and he rained kisses on her till she tore herself away,—“ why should it make any difference, Yorke ? ” he

said, once again, catching and forcibly detaining her; "cannot we be in the future all to each other that we have been in the past?"

"No," she cried; "if you have no conscience, I am not so fortunate. Do you not love this girl at all, Austin?—not at all?"

"Not as I love you," he answered. "She is very pretty and very innocent, and very trustful and very sweet; but she is not you, Yorke—not you."

"So much the better for her," was the reply; "she is the less likely to suffer what I have endured, and endured for you. And yet I knew it must come some day to good-bye—good-bye for ever." And she kissed him as though she were taking part of him away for ever too.

"And why good-bye, Yorke?—why cannot it be as I propose?" he whispered.

"Why?" she asked, standing back a step or two and looking at him in her great indignation with angry, passionate, tearful eyes,—"why? because, through all the years gone by, I have

seemed to myself your possible wife, not your actual mistress — because there was no other woman whose life I was making wretched, from whom I was taking the love you owed her. That is the why and the wherefore, as you desire the whole truth.” And she turned and walked towards the door, but at the threshold paused irresolute.

“I will not part from you in anger,” she said, coming back and stretching out her hand as a man might have done. “I must say ‘good-bye’ once more, and God bless you !”

“You do not mean that it shall be ‘good-bye’ really, Yorke ?” he asked.

“I mean it more solemnly than I ever meant anything in my life,” was the reply.

“You — you are not going to do anything rash ?” he ventured. And at the words she broke out into a little sharp laugh.

“You want to know if I am thinking of suicide, of slipping quietly away from life and its troubles. No, Austin, I am neither young enough

nor desperate enough for that. Sleep soundly without any such fear. There will be no one like me found dead in the river, or in your house with a laudanum-bottle clenched in her hand."

"Yorke, I cannot bear it," he said.

"But you must bear it," she replied. "I tell you I will not kill myself; I intend to bear my trouble bravely, and to mix no person's name up with it; there, will that content you? Good-bye!"

"One other word," he pleaded; "you must live."

"That is, you would say, in order to live I must eat and drink, have clothes to cover and a house to shelter me; and you are right; but I will take none of these things from you, Austin."

"Yorke!" and her name was uttered reproachfully.

"It is useless our discussing the matter further," she said; "and besides, I cannot talk about such affairs now. When I can think, when I can see, when I come to my senses a little, I will write to

you, or you may write to me; but we meet no more if I can help it. Good-bye!"

He stood with her hand—her hand, which was now steady enough, and cold as ice—in his for a moment irresolute, then he broke out; "O, Yorke, forget all about it; consider it all unsaid. Fancy anything, believe anything, rather than that I can part with you."

"But I can part with you," she answered. "Fancy! believe! What should I fancy or believe after what I have heard from your own lips this night? When the day is gone, can we, sitting in the darkness, go back and live through its brightness once more? Can we restore the shattered idol, can we bring back the dead to life? or when the golden bowl is broken and the silver cord loosed, can we begin again at the beginning, and live through the whole of our existence again? No, Austin, it may not be; and if it could, to-morrow morning you would repent that it was. Good-bye, for ever and for ever!" and she left the room with her head bent down, and the

tears she could not restrain pouring from her eyes.

He did not try to stop her, he knew every word she uttered was true; he felt that in this last interview, as during the course of the years they had loved one another, Yorke held a vantage-ground over him.

“To think of her taking it in *this* way!” he muttered to himself, looking at the declining fire, at the blackened cinders. “Who could have anticipated it?” and then he knew he was lying mentally, for that he had feared Yorke would take the news after some desperate fashion, and sever herself from him as she had done.

“But she never can hold to it,” he considered; “she may talk as she likes, but it is impossible for any woman to put the past from her in a moment. She is too tender, too sensible, not to see the matter in its true light. What else was I to do? better marry than starve; and I could not marry her. If I could, what a different life mine might have been! and hers—poor girl!—hers also.”

And then his thoughts fled off to Mary Monteith, to her large fortune, to the splendid connection opening before him, to the great chances which the future might hold for a man of his talent, and energy, and determination.

"There is nothing I may not yet hope to grasp," he reflected triumphantly; and then a mocking devil within seemed to answer:

"Nothing save that which you have already lost. Climb where you will, stand high as you may, Yorke has passed out of your life for ever. For ever and for ever. Did she not bid you good-bye just for that period which, in her vocabulary, means for time and for eternity?"

Then the man turned to grapple with his tormentor.

"It is impossible!" he cried, in his agony; and even as he thought this the door opened, and with a fierce exultation he beheld Yorke re-enter the room.

He would not speak to her, he would not evidence the mad delight it was to see her resolution changed already; so he still kept his face

turned towards the fire, waiting till she should come near and lay her hand on his shoulder and speak to him in the well-remembered loving accents he was never to hear more.

He waited, and held his breath to listen, and then the door shut. She had crossed to his writing-table, laid something down, and then without a word departed.

He walked across the room to find what token she had left him, and found upon his blotting-book a tiny little parcel wrapped up in white paper and sealed carefully.

With trembling fingers he tore open the covering, and beheld—the diamond-ring Yorke had worn on the third finger of her left hand.

Then he knew all was over between them, and he covered his face; while Yorke, having slowly ascended the wide staircase, entered her room, closed the door, and—with a great gulf set between her past and her future—tried to look steadily across the vast desert of years which she knew she must henceforward travel alone.

CHAPTER III.

YORKE'S DECISION.

THROUGH the darkness Yorke Friars thought over her past, her future, and her present—thought as such women do think in the time of their bitterest trouble—with dry, aching eyes, which never closed during the whole of that long winter's night.

She had thrown herself on her bed without undressing, and, as she kept her vigil, she heard the rain dashing against the window-panes, and the wind hurrying by and moaning amongst the branches of the leafless trees in the churchyard.

In her after-days, when her sorrow was but an olden memory, when the grief, and shame, and passion of that night had been blurred over by the softening hand of time, she understood that the

storm without was as nothing compared to the tempest raging within; that the tears were falling faster in her heart than the rain beat against the glass; that the wind, coming from wherever it listed, and flying onward through the darkness, was not one half so fierce as the hurricane of feeling warring inside her own breast, which could find no relief in sob, word, or action.

But as she lay there, she was not merely unable to analyse the extent of her anguish, she was unable even to think connectedly about it.

Over the billows of that sea of trouble on which she had been so suddenly launched, her mind floated hither and thither; and as one at the mercy of the winds and waves sees, whilst he remains at all in sight of shore, some constant change in the landscape, so this woman, cast adrift and floating away from all the sinful, pleasant, remorseful past, beheld—as her mind was borne from point to point, from the immensity of the ocean back almost within reach of land—the home of her youth, the well-remembered faces, the

hearth she had made desolate, the heart she had deceived and left lonely; and then, again, the great expanse of life stretching away before her, which she must traverse separated from the man whom she had loved so much as to render any return to home, friends, and kindred an impossibility.

There were moments when she could not realise her actual position, when she could not credit the evidence of her memory.

It was true that she had always felt there must come a day like this, when their paths would diverge—when he would have to turn one way and she another; but then there is a difference between anticipating an operation and lying under the knife.

Seated by the fire, he had dreamed his dreams, and seen his visions, and rehearsed them to her. He had beheld himself climbing from pinnacle to pinnacle; he had pictured Austin Friars wealthy once more—a man sought after, an individual well considered of, not merely in the City, but also in

those far different circles in which it was his ambition to revolve; and to all these imaginings Yorke had listened, too loving to desire that they might prove idle tales, and yet too wise not to know that if once the possible became the actual, he and she would have to part, to utter that farewell in time which it is harder to speak than the long "Good-bye" which leaves no hope of reunion till the sleep of death be over, and the life of eternity begun.

Mentally she had a hundred times over fancied him successful, honoured, happy; and in her woman's way she had done her poor best to hasten forward the result she dreaded; but not even in her happiest moments—not even when the man's heart seemed clinging most closely to hers—did she ever behold herself standing on the heights with him.

It was only in his poverty, in his troubles, in his struggles, she felt she could remain to him what she had been. And now, behold, he made his poverty, which she had shared, his anxieties, which

she had borne, his struggles, which had been her struggles too, the excuses for taking a step that severed them for ever !

She could have borne it better if the stroke had not come so soon, and thus ; if she had felt him gradually slipping away from the old life ; if the wound had not been so cruel and so swift.

After a fashion, she had been content to feel that at some future time they must part ; as a wife who knows she has a mortal disease consuming her, comes at length to think without bitter pain of the hour when she must leave her husband to go on his course alone, to find fresh interests, fresh friends, fresh ties, perhaps, while the grass is growing over the spot where he has laid her. It was a parting of this kind Yorke had vaguely shadowed forth to herself—a parting not painless, indeed, but free from all bitterness—an inevitable parting, caused not by any deed or act of their own, but by the uncontrollable course of circumstances—a parting which, though it must come some time, might yet be delayed almost indefi-

nately, which would be brought about more perhaps by her than him, which should never hinder either thinking tenderly and lovingly of the other to the last hour of their lives.

And now, behold, the picture, sad yet softened, was turned; and in lieu of the tender, sorrowful faces of her dream, she saw a man and a woman who had been all the earth, he to her, and she to him, standing singly—parting not indeed in anger, but in something worse than anger—separated in a moment by a chasm that could never be bridged over again.

Never, so long as the sun rose and set upon the earth; never while the seasons came and went; while the summer flowers bloomed, and the autumn fruits ripened; while the mountains stood, and the sea ebbcd and flowed; never for ever.

Had any one told her for a certainty that before morning she must die, the tidings would have seemed welcome by comparison; for this love had been more to her than life, more than hope, reputation, happiness.

Through the darkness she lay beholding each tower and chamber of the edifice built on the sands she had so long inhabited carried away by the remorseless waves, to be a home and a shelter to her no more—no more.

Tossing on the billows of a fiercer sea than mariner ever crossed, she looked back over the distance she had already travelled—back to the point whence she started, to the green fields and quiet haunts of her childhood, the only peaceful and innocent time she had ever known.

Adown the years, at the end of a long vista which seemed to narrow the prospect and bring past events more sharply and clearly before her mental vision, she beheld a cottage covered with ivy, surrounded by flowers, in the garden of which there stood a young girl at the point “where the stream and river meet”—a girl with her feet just on the very threshold of existence, looking with wistful eyes on life. Longing to take her place in it—longing for change, for pleasure, for society for companions of her own age—longing to be

where music made light hearts lighter, where young people like herself trod the mazy dance, where time should not hang heavily on her hands, where she could see and be seen.

From the loneliness of her home she looked out in her sweet youth wistfully, praying for some change to come which might break the desperate monotony of the days and weeks, which might make her lot like that of others of her age and position.

With the evening sun shining down upon her, with the gentle evening breeze stirring her hair, she stood amongst the flowers, "herself a fairer flower," when her fate rode up to the wicket-gate, and, dismounting, tied his horse to the palings, and then entered the garden.

There, in the darkness, she saw him clearly as she had seen him that first evening when he, her father's landlord, visited their house.

A dark, reserved, middle-aged, eccentric man, who was reported to detest women, to have made vows against marriage, who led the life of a

hermit, who had spent years and years abroad, and who had only just returned to take possession of Forde Hall, the chimneys and gables of which were just visible from the spot where Yorke Haddon stood.

How well she remembered that evening! There was not a gleam of sunshine, or an effect of light, a tracery of leaf or bough, but she could recall, lying there in the darkness.

How did it come about that the man fell in love with her sweet simplicity, with her girlish beauty; that, lacking her for mistress, the Hall seemed lonely; that, having her for inmate, the cottage seemed to him a fairer and grander habitation than the great abode which had come to him from his ancestors? That part of the business Yorke never understood; and, as for him, he had nothing ever to tell her about it, except that from the hour when he first beheld her— with her pure white dress unadorned save with a knot of pale-blue ribbon, with her hair floating in curls over her shoulders, with her eyes lifted

inquiringly to his—he loved her as he had never thought to love woman again.

And if Yorke had only loved him in return? Ah! well, in that case there could never have come so sad a tragedy in her life; never that parting in the City, never that vigil in the darkness, never so blank a future with so black a past, never a lonely hearth in a distant county, never a desolate heart beating and bruising itself because it could not but remember and repent.

The match was made up for her; she could plead so much in her own justification. She could have told of every argument being used to make her tolerate the lover she feared, who was as far from her ideal of the lover who should have come, as the actual life of most of us is far from the life we would have led had the choice lain with ourselves.

Her father—an utterly extravagant, needy, and unscrupulous man—sold her as coolly to the owner of Forde Hall, as he would have sold the

horse that carried him after the hounds, or the dog that crouched at his feet.

Money was what the man's soul craved for—money, or rather the things it can buy—and when he saw all his heart lusted after within his reach, it seemed not merely a justifiable, but also a meritorious, thing to offer up a human sacrifice for them.

Accordingly, Yorke was drilled, Yorke was frightened, and Yorke's life was made a misery to her, till at length even she, imagining marriage must be better than such an existence, agreed to accept the inevitable.

As for Mr. Forde, being one of those men who know nothing about the nature of women, whose talent blinds, and whose egotism misleads them, he attributed Yorke's terrified timidity to anything rather than its true cause, and pleased himself with considering how he would train this young pliant plant, how it should twine its tender tendrils around him, how he should be the oak and she the vine, how he should be more blessed than human being had ever been before in a

creature who would mould herself into any form he pleased, who, owning a much sweeter temper than biblical history affords us just ground for supposing Sarah possessed, should nevertheless call him "lord" with amazement.

But Yorke herself could have told a different tale, could have informed him how she would have given the world to be able to say, "Mr. Forde, I can never be your wife. Free me, ere it be too late for both of us!" For the child was breaking her heart over the proposed match, and paced her room, and lay awake crying, and went through all the orthodox agonies which young women married against their wills have enacted since time began, and which they will enact, doubtless, with great propriety and little benefit to themselves or anybody else, till time shall be no more.

For the young people who perpetrate these grand heroics are, as a rule, just the individuals who turn out the most decorous of wives, the most match-making of mothers.

They must have their little times of declamation, their heroic speeches, their hours of stupendous agony, before they retire behind the scenes to the tangible benefits of hot suppers and unromantic ale.

The mere fact of man or woman submitting to a distasteful fate proves, as a rule, that he or she was fitted for no better. It is those who refuse the supper, and pace the stage with no audience save their own feelings, that are the true tragedians; not those who accept the bridal-wreath and the substantial settlement, but rather the poor shivering wretch who faces the worst the world can do, sooner than enter upon that accursed union where soul and soul can never be other than separate.

As for Yorke Haddon, she went one step too far, and then, finding she could not bear it, retreated ignominiously. But for her youth, she had not gone so utterly astray; only she was, in the days of which I am now writing retrospectively, a mere child; and, like a child, frightened at the

consequences of her own act, she cut the knot of her difficulties by running away from them.

What she proposed to herself when, after having gone peaceably to church and promised to perform all manner of impossibilities, she slipped away from the wedding-breakfast, and, begging to be left alone for a few minutes, changed her white dress, and stole out of her father's house into the world, Yorke never could tell anyone.

She only knew she wanted to get away, and she knew also that her going was not the result of a premeditated plan, but merely the consequence of a sudden panic which routed her reason and rendered her perfectly incapable of reflecting how such a flight might change and mar the whole of her own and another person's life.

When the travelling-carriage drove up, and the bridesmaids went to look for the bride, they found the room empty and the bird flown.

There were her trunks all packed up ready for the journey; there was her wedding-dress flung

upon the bed ; in her drawers and in her wardrobe her ordinary linen and dresses rested undisturbed. She was gone ; but gone as if merely for a walk ; and some time elapsed before either father or bridegroom could realise to themselves the fact that she never meant to return.

They searched the garden for her, and the woods and shrubberies surrounding Forde Hall ; they dragged the lake ; they searched among the underwood ; they offered rewards ; they examined her desk, her little girlish treasures, her small packet of letters, to find a clue to the mystery of her disappearance.

But they never discovered it. No advertising in the *Times*, no employment of detectives, proved of the slightest service. Yorke's life had been a lonely one ; and no bosom friends could now come forward to enlighten Mr. Forde with regard to her real sentiments concerning him and her marriage.

The affair was a nine-days' wonder, ay, and more than that ; for at intervals paragraphs cropped up in the papers concerning the "MYSTE-

RIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF A BRIDE;” and one man was actually taken into custody because a locket known to have belonged to Mrs. Forde was found in his possession.

The fellow said he picked it up near a little bridge that had to be crossed by anyone walking over the fields towards Milden Station from Forde Hall; and that he meant no harm by keeping it: further, that he made no secret of having found the trinket; and that had he known to whom it belonged, he would have gone at once to Mr. Haddon.

He declared, moreover, he never saw Mrs. Forde on the day of her disappearance; that he noticed the locket as he came from his work at Milden, and that he would not have seen it, as it lay half-hidden among some grass, only, the sun happening to shine on it, the glitter attracted his attention.

All these statements might not perhaps have benefited him much had he not been able to prove the impossibility of his having been near Mr.

Haddon's cottage at or about the time when Mrs. Forde was missed. His employer and fellow-workmen swore to the fact of his being at Milden during the whole of the day in question; and on the strength of this evidence the magistrates discharged him somewhat reluctantly, and Mr. Forde returned home from the examination more mystified than ever.

There were not wanting, among prudent matrons and eligible young ladies, those who implied that Yorke had gone off with some more favoured lover; but scandal itself proved unable to say Yorke was ever known to have a lover save Mr. Forde.

As for Mr. Forde, at what period comprehension of the true state of the case dawned upon him it would be difficult to tell; but suspicion became certainty when, on discovering the extent of Mr. Haddon's embarrassments, he taxed that gentleman with having exercised an undue influence over Yorke, and compelled her to accept a man for whom she had not even the faintest shadow of affection.

It was all in vain that Mr. Haddon prevaricated, that he palliated and excused, that he set forth Yorke's youth and inexperience, and declared he had no idea but that, when once she was married, she would prove a loving and devoted wife. To the end Mr. Forde heard him ; then he said,

“ You have cursed two lives ; you have sacrificed me, and you have sacrificed your daughter ; but still, for her sake, I will relieve you from your present embarrassments if you help me to find Yorke, that I may see what is best to be done for both of us. My God, she is but a child ! ”

And the man's voice broke, for a vision came before him of the girl as he had seen her first standing in the garden, with the beams of the evening sun falling across her hair.

He believed in Yorke ; he believed in her innocence, her purity, her integrity. It was useless for Job's comforters to suggest that perhaps things were best as they had turned out ; that doubtless father and daughter were in league ; that the first dishonour of her flight was the least dishonour she

might have brought upon him : nothing changed his faith in the wife he had chosen.

For days, weeks, months, years, he expected to hear from her, to receive tidings of her whereabouts, and even to see her return to her home and her husband. When she found how hard a place the world was to dwell in, he trusted she would come back to him ; when she grew older and comprehended more fully the nature of the wrong she had inflicted, he believed she would long to implore his forgiveness.

“She was but a child,” he repeated to himself pitifully, “and there was none to help her.” And out of the experience of his own middle age he thought mercifully and tenderly of the young life blasted, of all the suffering Yorke must have endured before she elected to face the world’s chill blasts rather than travel through existence with him.

He was a good man and a just, this husband whom Yorke, in her senseless inexperience, in her girlish selfishness, forsook ; and as she lay in the

darkness, she thought of him, and wondered what life had been to that tricked and deluded lover since the morning when last she beheld his face.

“He believes me dead, no doubt,” she considered; it was what she had always desired he should believe about her; and then she remembered the latest tidings Austin had brought to her of him, namely, that Forde Hall was shut up, and its owner wandering on the Continent; and she wondered, in a vague, stupid sort of way, whether his life were as utter a shipwreck of every hope as her own.

She knew now—knew out of the depths of her own sorrow—that she had placed it beyond his power to marry again. She began to consider—confusedly, it was true—whether she might not thwart Austin’s plans for the future, by writing to her husband, and leaving it open for him to procure a divorce.

“I wish I had done it years ago,” she said aloud; “it would have freed us both.” And then, in a sudden access of agony, she buried her face in

her pillow, remembering that no freedom in the future could ever restore to her the man she had loved—could ever make her believe in him again—heal the wound he had dealt—or make her look in his face with the same eyes.

Her life was now but a tangled, twisted skein the threads of which might never more be separated and made smooth—a knotted, confused mass of contradictory feelings, impulses, sins, sorrows, virtues—strands of different colours mingling and intermingling—memories, regrets, fears, mixed up together, beyond the possibility of extrication.

And it might all have been so different! Might—ah, God!

She had held it in her own hand once to do what she liked with, and behold, after the years, this was the state in which it now came back to her, to make a better thing of—if she could.

If she could! What must she do with it—how support it—how, even from a pounds, shillings, and pence view, exist? She had told Austin Friars she would accept nothing from

him ; and she asked herself now what steps she must take to procure a bare subsistence.

Once she began to consider this question, her other troubles appeared to grow lighter. The blessed necessity for exertion seemed to deaden the force of the blow she had received. She was a lonely woman thrown upon her own resources at a moment's notice, and not an instant, she felt, must now be lost in forming her future plans.

Pride, indignation, wounded affection, and a perfect horror of dependence, all stimulated her desire to strike out some course which she might at once follow. Project after project she looked at and rejected ; and it was only when the first gray of morning appeared in the sky that a sudden idea occurred to her—which grew into shape, and formed itself into a more practicable plan the longer she looked at it.

“That is the only road at present open,” she determined at length ; “and if it lead to nowhere I can but abandon it after a time.”

Having arrived at which decision she arose—for it was now broad daylight—and crossing over to her dressing-table, looked for a moment in the glass with a smile on her lips Austin Friars would not have cared to see, had he been there to behold.

CHAPTER IV.

LUKE ROSS.

AT the time when Mr. Friars was thinking of altering his domestic relations, there lived in the suburb of Homerton a man named Luke Ross. He had a pretty-enough house there; for the neighbourhood was never one particularly run after by Londoners, and rents were lower everywhere than they are at present—both of which facts enabled him to inhabit a better residence than his actual position might have seemed to warrant, since he was only book-keeper in a third-rate City house.

Though not large, the houses in Pelham-terrace, Church-street, one of which he rented, were yet built with a certain pretension of style

which rendered them internally and externally superior to other suburban residences of a similar class.

The usual three-foot passage leading from the front-door to the kitchen was absent, and in its place appeared a square entrance-hall, with rooms opening off it—rooms that, if small in their proportions, overlooked, nevertheless, a succession of pretty gardens sloping down the hill on which the houses were built, together with the wide marshlands stretching away and away beyond.

Altogether, his habitation was apparently, as I have said, somewhat above the means of a mere book-keeper; but then his aunt, Mrs. Holmes, who had a small jointure, and her daughters, who were not wholly destitute of means either, resided with Mr. Ross; and all the little incomes clubbed together swelled the modest items into an aggregate of competency that should have seemed satisfactory in the eyes of a quiet man like Luke Ross.

But the man was not satisfied. Dimly he felt

his life lacked something ; and as he had never set foot firmly even on the edge of that enchanted ground which makes existence so pleasant, so greatly to be desired by those who are free of the estate I have referred to, he concluded that the goods the gods had failed to send him were money and—a wife.

To the best of his relations' belief, he had never seen a woman, on whom he bestowed more than a passing thought ; further, they were satisfied he had never seen a woman, excepting the modestly-dowered maidens afore mentioned, worthy to wipe his shoes ; but, then, even in England, and the circle to which Luke Ross belonged, people do not know everything ; and Luke Ross was not going to entertain his domestic circle with a tale of how that there lived one whose very shadow flung across his path filled his heart full to overflowing ; how that the tones of her voice were to him as the heavenliest music which could fall on mortal ear ; how that, although the place where she dwelt was not on the way to anywhere, he yet,

in the summer evenings, stole as near to it as he dared, and skulked about when the dark nights came, as a votary might linger around a shrine where some idol dwelt invisible.

Whatever of poetry his prosaic life held was associated with her ; whatever of ideal beauty he had conceived, whatever of that subtle essence of almost unreal happiness, which some people go to their graves without ever having tasted, he experienced, he owed to his love, his hopeless love for her ; whatever of romance the poor, monotonous, wearily-respectable existence contained, owed its plot to her ; and all the time his aunt and cousins were quizzing him in their soberly-facetious fashion concerning his indifference to the charms of Miss This, and That, and The-other, he was thinking to himself about one whom he had seen, and to whom he was not indifferent, but who could never be anything to him.

NEVER—he had repeated that sentiment to himself so often, it was singular he considered it necessary to utter the formula again.

And yet with all the veins of his heart he loved her so passionately, that, for his very soul's peace, and to reassure the utterly moral and respectable part of his character, he felt it necessary to go through the routine of life, whispering sobbingly to that portion of his nature which fought and struggled against the decision, "It can never be—never, for ever: for ever, never."

To himself he swore she could not, under any possible combination of circumstances, become his wife.

Where his mother—a model matron, a virtuous widow—had lived, could he bring *her*? Certainly not. Where his aunt—a pattern amongst women—governed his household, and his cousins, who, though they might have heard of temptation, had happily never encountered it, dwelt, could he ask her to reign? Most decidedly no.

He loved her—passionately, but not madly. Mark you, reader, I pray; for though the two words have been regarded as synonymous, there is a difference; and never in his wildest flights did

Luke Ross then think of waking from his dream and changing the love of his dream into his wife.

For, after all, he was but a prosaic, commonplace creature; fettered even in his love by the surroundings of his daily life, and incapable of understanding that a woman who has—shall we say it?—gone very far astray may yet, because even of her sin, be a hundred times too good to mate with a man who has lived the most decorous of lives—gone twice to Church every Sunday, said his prayers regularly, and thanked God he was not as yonder poor Publican, but rather a nineteenth century Pharisee.

Of what, with different surroundings, he might have been, it is useless to speculate; but from his youth upwards he had led just that sort of life which spoils a man *as a man*, more, perhaps, than the wildest and maddest extravagances.

He had never mixed much in general society. During his mother's lifetime he only left business in order to take a turn on the domestic treadmill.

"Dear boy!" his admirable parent was wont to

remark; "he finds his pleasures in his home!" which went to prove, not that the pleasures capable of being drawn from the home-fountain were inexhaustible, but that the young man was most singularly easily satisfied.

For a home less calculated to develop the higher part of a man's nature, more likely to dwarf and cramp his mind, it would be difficult to conceive. The terribly monotonous, orthodox existence; the day filled with small interests; the evening spent in listening to paltry gossip and petty talk; the life, into the consciousness of which there entered the conception of nothing either great or grand, of nothing tragic or inexpressibly pitiful; which bounded the horizon of existence with the view obtainable from its own poor windows; which had no cognisance of the great oceans, of the desert plains, of the lofty mountain peaks, of the soft green valleys; which understood nothing, not even the vastness of its own mediocrity—what could all this do for a man save render him a Pharisee, save make him pin his faith

to accurate figures, and punctual attendance at office six days in the week, and to best clothes and morning and evening service on the sabbath?

Only he knew a woman—whereby hangs a tale—or rather, he had known a woman, and that fact made a good deal of difference. They never met now, and yet he thought of her continually—thought more about the folds of her dress, the waves of her hair, the tones of her voice, the sweet, sorrowful, beseeching expression of her face, than was good for him.

And all the time he kept saying to his own soul, which rebelled against the monotonous propriety of his daily life, “It is better so; she could never be anything to me—never, for ever: for ever, never.”

Behold, even in his renunciation he quoted the poetry she had once repeated, and which, because she once repeated, became thenceforth part of his life. “Never, for ever: for ever, never.” True, O friend; yet not true for the reason you imagine, but merely because the woman, with all her sins, with all her short-

comings, with all her load of sorrow, was yet too good to become a part and parcel of your existence; because we attach such different meanings to the word "excellence," that what is the purest virtue in this world's estimate shall yet, when the universal account be cast up, prove to have been only the burying of God's talent in a napkin—clean, it may be, but still of grossly earthy manufacture.

"Luke is so good," his mother had been wont to declare; and Luke had grown up with a thorough conviction of his own goodness—which consciousness was in itself an insult to the bulk of humanity—till he met with a woman who, judged according to his standard, was as far from good as anyone can be; and then he began faintly to understand that there were more things in heaven and earth than had ever been dreamed of in his philosophy.

If I say that from the day he first beheld her, a diviner light seemed to gleam through the darkness of his previous existence—that he stood from

thenceforth in a narrow room, it might be, but with the door of egress therefrom partly open—that he comprehended better why he had been born into a world of sin and sorrow—that he understood, through the suffering of his very humanity, his Bible more fully, and grasped God's promises all the better, because the lost sheep was dearer to him than the ninety-and-nine moral lambs amongst whom his lot had hitherto been cast—there will not be wanting readers who shall call me profane, simply because I tell the truth.

The man loved—not decorously, not happily, not according to the strict tenets of his faith, not in consonance with the opinions in which he had been brought up—but just because he could not help loving a woman to whom the goodness of which his mother had boasted would, in its narrow, respectable, ignorant bigotry, have been unintelligible—a woman who knew more than he could ever tell her—who had felt more than he, without her help, was ever likely to feel in the future—who, fallen though she might be, was yet

more angelic in her sin than he in his virtue—who was more to him than mother, or aunt, or cousins had ever been, or might ever be—Yorke Friars, the only woman he had ever really loved.

He knew all about her, or at least he thought he did, which came to much about the same thing—knew all about her, when he first proposed to Austin Friars the scheme that was to make them both rich; and he worked under the same roof with her, satisfied if he saw her once a-week, if he heard the rustling of her dress, if he knew that she knew he was working with heart and soul and strength to advance his—Mr. Friars'—interests, and hers—hers, that could never be quite one with those of Austin Friars. Ah, well-a-day!

And when he and Mr. Friars quarrelled, Luke Ross was glad to remember no harsh word had passed his lips—that he gathered up his goods, and said farewell to his ambitious hopes, and went forth without uttering a bitter remark, merely because *he* was dear to her, and she was dear to Luke.

Who shall say there is no love in the world? Pshaw, friends! Love rules the world; Love is the only monarch; Love tells few tales about his influence over his subjects; and yet everyone at some time or other acknowledges his supremacy! Love sets in motion the spur wheel which turns all the other wheels of existence; and when we see the whole machinery of some human being's career out of order, we may feel quite sure—no matter what other tale Society is pleased to rehearse and believe—that Love has thrown the motive-power out of gear.

Love is life; and therefore he who has not loved has not lived. *Vive l'amour!* In a draught more precious than the juice of the grape, we quaff to thee, O Love; for in the camp and in the grove, in the quiet country-house and the city-office, Love is king over all.

And behold, Luke Ross acknowledged his supremacy! He whose pulse had never before throbbed more than a few beats faster at sight of any woman—who, if he had married at all, would

first have weighed *pros* and *cons*, the cost of maintaining a wife, the amount of *dot*, the probabilities of the "young person" honoured by his regard discharging her duties properly, looking after her servants, attending to the cooking, seeing that his shirts were duly got-up and provided with buttons, and bringing up his children in the way they should go—was now as much in love as any boy of seventeen, and more senselessly than a lad ever was, because the young always believe in the possibility of impossibilities; and Luke Ross, with his very heart breaking for love of her, nevertheless acknowledged to his own soul there was *that* about Yorke which must for ever place a bar between her and any honest man.

This was the eminently practical way in which he settled the question when he was talking it over with himself; and it is not for me to improve on his mode of expression. For him the incarnation of respectability was the life he saw led by the women amongst whom his lot had hitherto been thrown; and though he now also

knew that not any one among them could ever in the future satisfy his ideal, he was not yet so blind to his own character as to imagine there could be permanent happiness in store for either, if he strayed far from the path of virtue, and asked Yorke Friars to marry him. And for this reason, because he was so certain both of his own strength and of his own weakness, it had never been necessary for him to go into the deeper question as to whether Yorke would marry him. If a man be quite sure that under no possible combination of circumstances can a woman ever become his wife, the woman's probable answer, if he asked her, assumes a position of secondary importance. At all events, this was not a question which Luke Ross had yet duly considered. When he thought of it at all, he perhaps believed she would,—not as an affair of passionate attachment, but as a matter of expediency and respectability.

He did not know that any life—almost any life—no matter how bare of everything which can make “living” endurable, would have seemed

to Yorke preferable to that he led. A garret and a crust, solitude and the world's cold looks, she would have esteemed happiness, rather than his home, if with his home she were compelled to accept him and his surroundings. Setting even the absence of all love on her part aside, the life, the society, the hopeless mediocrity, the self-satisfied commonness and contentment of the whole existence, would have killed her. Better a common, even though it be a bare one, with the fresh air blowing around, than the stuffy atmosphere of some of those houses we, reader, wot of; and after her years of sorrow, of joy, of trouble, of delight, of freedom which she had fought for, of slavery into which she had sold herself, not for a price but for love, was it likely that the woman I have described should ever accept the shelter of Luke Ross's home for the mere sake of being called by the name of wife?

Had this thing been within the bounds of credibility—had it been possible for the long love, the bitter contempt, the intense devotion, the mad

desire for self-assertion, to settle down quietly and gratefully at last in such a nest, Yorke Friars could have played no part in this story : she must have glided away beyond our ken when Austin Friars passed out of hers ; when the winter's night-vigil ended, she rose up to face the future, having taken her resolve.

Naturally, had Mrs. Holmes and her daughters known anything of the state of Luke's heart, they would have hated Yorke ; for it is one of the beautiful characteristics of those women who are not capable of winning a man's passionate attachment, that they detest those other women who are.

Even as matters stood, they at one period conceived a doubt and a mistrust of "that Mrs. Friars," which caused Luke for ever after to maintain a discreet silence concerning her. It was a strange thing, they averred,—and averred truly,—for a man and his sister-in-law to be living alone together.

"It would be more decent, I think," declared Mrs. Holmes, "for her to have a home of her own."

"They cannot afford it," Luke meekly explained. He was honourable, this man; and though he knew "all about it," he was neither going to throw mud on Yorke himself, nor yet to let other people do so in his hearing, if he could help it.

"But a good-looking person, even if she is a widow, should be careful about what people may say," persisted Mrs. Holmes.

"If people are going to have bad thoughts," Luke replied, "they will have them, no matter how careful a woman may be; and it is not Mrs. Friars' fault that she is good-looking."

"Still, I think——"

"My dear aunt," interrupted Mr. Ross, "whatever you may think, I wish you would not say. I know for a fact that every sixpence Mrs. Friars has in the world is invested in her brother-in-law's business, and they could not possibly afford the expense of two establishments, even were it necessary for them to do so; and I consider it very hard, indeed I do, that you, aunt, of all

people, should be the first to imagine evil of one of the best and most unselfish women I ever met."

"Oh, of course, if you are so devoted to her _____"

"I am not in the least devoted to her," retorted Luke angrily; "but I hate to hear one woman talking ill of another. Suppose anything were to happen to you, should you not think it very hard if our neighbours were to begin scandalising the girls for staying on with me, simply because I am not actually their brother?"

"I trust, when I am gone, my daughters would not think of doing such a thing as residing with a bachelor," said Mrs. Holmes, getting very red; for Luke had her on the hip, and she knew it.

"Why, where would be the impropriety in that case, if there be none at present?" he asked.

"No young unmarried person should reside alone in the house with any man, unless he be her brother or uncle," kindly explained Mrs. Holmes.

"But then," persisted Luke, "in the first place,

my cousins are not young; and in the next, Mrs. Friars has been married" (his blood was up, and he did not stand nice about uttering a very plain truth, and also what he believed to be a falsehood); "so that either way, even upon your own showing, your argument will not hold water. Your daughters might live under the same roof with me with perfect propriety, and there can be no harm in a woman keeping house for her brother-in-law. People in our rank can no more afford to follow the conventional ideas of the higher classes than to ape their style of living."

After this, the intelligent reader may imagine how Yorke stank in the nostrils of Mrs. and the Misses Holmes; for though they had never seen, they disliked her, and considered her a dangerous woman.

Great edifices had been built by his relations on the strength of Mr. Ross going into partnership—that was the way they put the matter—with Mr. Friars. Prospectively, they had beheld man-servants and maid-servants, cattle and

strangers, within their gates; they had visions of Brighton in the season—yea, even of a continental tour; they had dreamed of stalls at Drury Lane and a box at the Opera; they had seen themselves in imagination parts and parcels of the Park show instead of mere spectators of it: and yet, when they awoke from all these dreams, and came in their sober senses to find Luke only a book-keeper once again, it may be questioned whether the relief of knowing him separated from Mrs. Friars did not more than compensate for the loss of their illusions.

Money might be made elsewhere; but Mrs. Friars, a widow,—a designing, dangerous, improper widow, who kept house for her brother-in-law,—and of whom Luke had spoken in terms of the warmest admiration! could any sacrifice be considered too great if it only involved getting rid of her?

And thus, when Mr. Friars and Mr. Ross parted company, the female members of Luke's family breathed again freely; for was not the stable-

door locked once more securely? and how were they, in their ignorance, to know the steed was gone past recall?

Regularly and decorously Luke Ross returned from his employer's office to the domestic tea and toast and muffins in winter, to the tea, bread-and-butter, and water-cresses provided by his devoted relations in the summer season. Still the same existence went on day after day, week after week, month after month—a little bad music, a little stupid talk, a considerable amount of smoking, short walks, there and back again, about Homerton, Clapton, and Hackney Wick; two or three friends dropping in to supper; occasional “evenings out,” at which young ladies looked amiable, and men seemed excessively uncomfortable; a life unbroken even by trouble—a life from out of which all excitement had died away—which held neither bud, flower, fruit, nor decay—which the man's soul sickened of, while his sense accepted. So passed the warm days of summer, and the darkening autumn evenings, and the long nights

of winter, till one afternoon on his return from business, when Mrs. Holmes, looking at him over her spectacles, said: "There is a letter for you, Luke. Kate, go and get it off the drawing-room chimney-piece. I was dusting there when the postman brought it."

Now, even an individual like Luke Ross, who is a householder, occasionally receives letters from the tax-collector, from his landlord, from those tradespeople who search through the Directory and kindly send circulars on all manner of subjects to all sorts of persons; and there was consequently nothing in the mere fact of the postman having knocked at his door to account for the extreme severity of Mrs. Holmes' manner, which seemed so strange to her nephew that he inquired, as though his relations must of necessity be acquainted with all his correspondents, "Who is it from?"

"A lady," answered Mrs. Holmes, with a peculiar pursing-up of her lips, and a scrutinising glance at her nephew, who could not help

changing colour, while his heart gave a great leap. Was it from Yorke? And if so, what did she want? Was it—was it? He heard his cousin crossing the hall, but he would not go a step to meet her; he knew his aunt was expecting him to ask, "What lady?" but he only stuffed his hands deep into his pockets, and turned towards the window. It was Saturday, and he had got home earlier than usual.

"O, from Mrs. Friars!" he said carelessly, turning over the envelope. "I wonder what it is about!" And, instead of rushing out of the room with her letter, as his first impulse led him, he opened it before them all, and read the few lines it contained.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Holmes interrogatively, and as if expecting a sight of the note, which, however, Luke carefully put back in its envelope and placed in his pocket-book, while he answered:

"She wants me to do something for her."

"Cool, certainly, considering the way they treated you," remarked his cousin Melinda.

"Mrs. Friars never treated me otherwise than well and courteously," he said; "and even if she had, we ought not to bear ill-will for ever."

"O, of course you would forgive anything from her," sniffed Melinda, who, cherishing no matrimonial designs against Mr. Ross, established herself nevertheless as her sister's champion.

"I thought I told you once before I would not have that." And Luke turned round upon his women with a look in his eyes which said "danger!" as clearly as any red signal. "Mrs. Friars is nothing to me, and she is certainly nothing to you; and I suppose she may write a note to me without first asking your permission."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Miss Melinda; "one has only to mention Mrs. Friars' name, and you flare up like a bull at sight of a red cloak."

"You had better not mention it, then," said Luke; and he left the room, banging the door after him.

He went out and took a cheerful walk through the gathering darkness in the direction of Old

Ford, cursing himself for his irritation, and striding on in order to get rid of it. For nearly a year he had neither seen nor heard from her; for a year he had scarcely spoken her name; for a year he had gone on like a horse in a mill, discharging a dull round of monotonous duties; for a year the stable-door had been, as his relations considered, safely locked; and behold, this was the end of it—only a line or two, and the man's soul rejoiced within him; only a word, and he was ready to quarrel with "his dearest friends," so Mrs. Holmes pathetically put it, "on account of her."

"Nothing shall ever tempt me to speak about her again," he decided; which was a man's resolve all over.

Men talk about a woman, praise her, trot her out, extol her accomplishments, rehearse her virtues, repeat her sayings, discourse concerning her beauty, her manners, her dress, her walk, her amiability, till all their own female belongings are ready to tear her eyes out; and then, when

all the harm that can be done has been done, they determine to hold their tongues; which course only causes the female inquisition to pass summary judgment on the pair, and declare there is something wrong.

Given that a woman wants a champion, God deliver her safe from the kindly defence of the one who loves her best, perhaps, in all the world! Choose rather, sweet one, for your knight against all comers, he who has tolerated your songs, and refused to believe in your wit; who has scoffed at and scorned you, laughed at your womanly arts, and detected your feminine littleness; who may truly stand your friend, since he is not your lover; who will know what to say and how to say it; and who may safely take your hand and lead you in triumph away from your detractors, if only because he knows how poor and weak and defenceless and incapable a little creature—spite of your red and white, of your lithe figure, of your gay laugh, of your pretty accomplishments, of your affectation of strength,

of your assumption of knowledge—you really are.

To the last drop of blood in his body, Luke Ross would have fought for Yorke Friars; but then he did not know how to fight in a woman's defence, and consequently his championship was valueless. Worse than valueless; for it only set his women against him, and his females were not drawn from a rank given to merciful judgments, to charitable deductions. Nevertheless, what did Luke Ross care for what any woman thought, as he returned home slowly through the darkness.

Had she not written? Was he not to see her again? Were not the lines she had traced lying next his heart at that moment? And those lines were so immensely suggestive. Judge of them for yourself:

“DEAR MR. ROSS,—I want to speak to you particularly. As it may not be pleasant for you to come here, will you call at Mr. Fulke's office about four o'clock on Monday? If this day and

hour be inconvenient, kindly name your own time. I do not make any apology for troubling you, as I know you will do me a service, if you can.

“Very truly yours,

“B. Y. FRIARS.”

Much too easy and unembarrassed for love; much too confident for consciousness; but what did it matter? Through the months he had fasted, and now he was to see her once again. There had been a long winter, but now it was spring; and already he beheld in a mental vision snowdrops and crocuses, primroses and violets. He saw in his mind's eye the sunshine streaming over the landscape, and the apple-blossoms blushing in its beams; and he never asked himself, “Shall a night come to end this day? Shall frost nip these buds? Shall clouds succeed to this sunshine?”

He was to see her, and that was enough. It was as the morrow's holiday to the child—as the first blush of convalescence to the sick.

Shall we say, friends, that love is only for boy and girl—for the birds in February—for the young who have not known sorrow? If so, we shall say that which is false; for though the May-blossoms can never return, a fiercer sun streams down across the summer landscape, and a mellower light falls over the autumnal fields; and even in winter, even then there are hours when we can almost believe the olden beams are flooding the darkness of nature's night, and giving promise of a world where there shall be love without decay, and happiness unattended by sorrow, its inevitable companion here.

CHAPTER V.

BY THE RIVER.

How Luke Ross passed the hours that intervened between the receipt of Yorke's letter and four P.M. on Monday, he never exactly knew.

Some friends "dropped in," as was their wont, to supper on the Saturday night—friends who talked about politics, and the state of the money-market—who played whist for sixpenny points—who ate an unromantic amount of supper, and finished their "tumblers" decorously afterwards.

Luke was a man whose head could stand a good many tumblers without becoming much affected by them; nevertheless, when he awoke on the Sunday morning, he could not help knowing he would have been better without that last

bumper which he drained to "Sweethearts and Wives." Of previous bumpers History has preserved no record, and we may well follow her reticent example.

"Here's to your very excellent health, Miss Kate!" said a friend of the family, when the charming toast above referred to was drunk; and Miss Kate simpered and looked conscious, while other friends of the family glanced meaningly at Luke, as though they would have suggested, "Now is your time; out with it, and let us know at once how the land lies."

But Luke, instead of "speaking up like a man," only looked angry, and as though it would have pleased him to strangle all the company; and a silence fell upon the guests, and the friends of the family began to consider there must be something amiss, being assisted to that conclusion by Melinda's sour glances, and a tremulous movement of Mrs. Holmes' cap, which vibrated with an emotion she was powerless to conceal.

For it had been Yorke Friars *he* meant, and

they suspected the fact; whilst it was Kate Holmes they desired should make him happy; and each felt naturally indignant at the view of so momentous a question taken by the other party.

Further, as he went slowly to church the next morning, dutifully accommodating his pace to that of Mrs. Holmes—who, being troubled with much flesh, shortness of breath, flat feet, and many corns, to say nothing of a constitutional disinclination to move her limbs at all, crawled rather than cantered along the Homerton pavements—Luke felt indignant with himself.

What! Did he love a woman whom he could never marry, and yet toast her mentally before a prosaic, unimaginative, and unappreciative audience? They were a common set,—thus Luke went on, secretly vilifying his acquaintances,—or they would never have connected Kate Holmes' name with his.

“As though, after a man had known Yorke Friars”—I spare you the rest, reader. It is the man most recently and imperfectly educated who

has least tolerance for ignorance ; it is the man to whom the romance of love has come after long years of abstinence from all such fiction who thinks all other men ought to take the same interpretation out of its pages as it delights him to do ; and it is the man who has lived, and lived contentedly, amongst one set of people who, when once his eyes are opened, complains in his soul of their being utterly different from, and dissimilar to, some other he wots of.

All this was the case with Luke Ross, at any rate. From the colour of Mrs. Holmes' bonnet-strings to the shape of Kate's hand, nothing pleased the man in those days of which I am writing. There had been a time when the nod of Mr. Christopher Karslake, churchwarden, cordwainer, and householder, gratified him ; but that time had gone for ever. There had been a period when the grim superiority of his dining-room delighted him—when his twelve highly-polished Spanish-mahogany chairs with stuffed backs, his telescope dining-table, his sideboard set out with decanters, wine-glasses,

and other rare and expensive ornaments, were a pleasure for him to reflect upon—when his engravings of “Bolton Abbey,” of “Dignity and Impudence,” of “Victoria in her Coronation-robcs,” “Hawking,” and a few other such gems, had filled his heart with a pride and a pleasure unspeakable.

But now he loathed all these vanities: even the table-cover — a *chef-d'œuvre* in red, green, purple, and black—failed to excite a momentary thrill of gratification. What to him thenceforth were bright fire-irons, and a book-case filled with editions of the best authors, bound in cloth and gilt-lettered? It was for something very different the man's soul craved—for a wife like Yorke Friars, only without the dark shadow lying across her story—for a woman such as he conceived her to be, though they might have only a garret for a home, only a crust to satisfy their hunger.

There are some people of whom it has been said, that to know them is a liberal education.

Whether in an ordinary way this statement be true or not, it might be rash to aver; but sure

am I of one thing—namely, that a man's education is only beginning when he falls in love, and that none but a woman can make or mar, mould and influence the whole of his future life.

Of course we have been told a hundred times over that the woman who exercises this power is a mother; and you, reader, can believe the story if you please; only I prefer to accept what mine eyes have seen, and to feel certain no man knows what the meaning of "going to school" is, till he has seen, in his maturer years, the woman he loves and would like to marry. The fair sex are not thus susceptible.

"No," adds an ironical demon at my elbow; "for though Adam took his first lesson from Eve, Eve took hers from the Devil."

After that, there is no use in pursuing the question further, excepting to state that, in other places besides the Garden of Eden, men receive their best knowledge of good and evil from eating of the apple handed to them by soft, white, entreating hands.

At all events, such was the case with Luke Ross. He had entered a life wherein a contemplation of Gillow's best book-cases gave no abstract pleasure—wherein upholstery played no part at all—wherein no churchwarden's nod could satisfy the hunger of a human soul—wherein wealth acted a small part, and love was almost all in all.

“Love excited by such a woman!” says chig-noned Virtue, stepping along Life's pavements in short petticoats and high-heeled boots. Ay, Virtue says this, and says it with an unbecoming sneer. But my dear Virtue, my beloved Censor, many a saint walks this weary earth dressed in sable garments. It is not given to everyone to combine fashion and the strictest propriety; an unexceptionable ankle, in fact, and the latest Parisian fashions.

Suppose for a moment—But no, we will not suppose anything about it. We will, instead, return to our poor sheep, Mr. Ross, who duly, on the Monday afternoon mentioned by Yorke Friars, went to his slaughter.

He would have gone to the gallows had she told him to do so—anything save marry her, as he thought; but then a man's thoughts are liable to change, more especially in the presence of the woman he loves.

As to whom Mr. Fulke was, or how Yorke became acquainted with him, Luke Ross never paused to inquire. He only afterwards remembered vaguely that he found himself at that gentleman's office a few minutes before the appointed hour, and was told Mrs. Friars would be disengaged immediately.

Almost immediately, indeed, a kindly-faced man, with iron-gray hair, came out of the private office, and saying, "You will find Mrs. Friars within, sir," put on his hat, and departed.

"I ought to apologise," Yorke began; but Mr. Ross begged her not to do so.

"Then I must get to business at once, since this is a business visit," she said, with a little nervous laugh; and Luke took the seat she pointed out.

"Do you remember, Mr. Ross," she inquired,

“the certainty we all had of making our fortunes when you came among us two years ago?”

There is a good deal in the way of putting things, friends, and Mrs. Friars possessed this airy faculty; for which reason Luke admitted they had all hoped, and added that he only regretted the fact of those hopes having proved fallacious.

“But they need not have done so,” said the siren.
“Need not, that is, with proper management.”

“Such was my idea at the time,” he replied;
“and, after mature consideration, I have seen no reason to alter my idea.”

“Then I have a proposal to make to you,” she declared. “How warm this room is!”

Temperature, it may here be remarked, is to the female mind as a buckler and a shield to the male body—a very defence in time of trouble; not that, in the humble opinion of the individual who pens these lines, it matters one straw to them whether the room be hot or cold, whether the thermometer stand at 98°, or below zero, only women can use the weather; and, God bless them!

it is part of their pleasant nature to use anything they can lay hand on, or tongue to.

“Shall I open the door?” inquired Luke Ross.

“With all those clerks outside!” she said, with a little shriek of amazement at his folly.

“Shall I open the window?” he proceeded.

“By no means,” she replied; and then, finding he was but a poor stupid, straightforward simpleton after all, who did not understand fence, she untied her bonnet and proceeded: “Mr. Friars is going to be married.”

Here was a ball worth firing into the enemy’s camp; and although that ball had first demolished the walls of her own citadel, she had none the less pleasure in using it.

“Going to be married!” he repeated.

“Yes; he has proposed for, and been accepted by, Miss Monteith. Remember, Mr. Ross, I tell you this in strict confidence, since I believe the engagement has not yet been made public.”

“Well, I am astonished!” Luke Ross exclaimed.

“Why?” Yorke Friars, holding her bonnet by the strings, and bending slightly forward, asked him this question in a tone of the extremest interest.

“Because I should not have thought him the kind of man to —” Here Luke stopped and hesitated, finding that in fleeing from one conversational quagmire he had almost fallen into another.

Yorke, however, was equal to the difficulty: “Strike a girl’s fancy,” she calmly finished; and her soul flew back across the waters of the past, and brooded over them as she spoke. “There we differ; but that question can have no interest for either of us. The marriage is arranged, and will take place almost immediately. Even before that event happens, however, the firm of A. Friars & Co. is to become merged in Monteith & Co.”

“And you—” He uttered these two words almost involuntarily, but he could not help himself: they passed his lips whether he would or not. “And you—”

"And I," she said, with a slight shrug—"it was concerning the future of that insignificant personage, myself, I wished to see you. Of course my interest in the business ceases."

"Of course," he assented; "in the great house of Monteith & Company—"

"A woman could find no resting-place for the sole of her foot," she added quickly. "I do detest half-completed sentences, and should feel so much obliged if you would finish whatever you want to say without considering it necessary, out of regard to my feelings, to break off in the middle. But you are quite right. To Friars & Co. my money and my time were valuable: to Monteith & Co. they would be simply an insult. Do you follow me, Mr. Ross?"

"So far," he said, "not to the end."

"Well," she proceeded, "what I propose to do is to carry on the business myself."

"Yourself!" he exclaimed.

She had not led up very skilfully to this point, and she felt her error. She had perched him in a

moment on her own mental pinnacle without showing him the steps by which she had climbed there, and it was no wonder the man thought her scheme a wild one, her position untenable.

"That is, in a word, my plan," she began. "I will now tell you how I mean to carry it out, and how I came to think of it. To begin with: you will admit I know almost as much of the business as Mr. Friars himself."

"More," Mr. Ross acknowledged. "Mr. Friars never paid proper attention to it."

"To the correspondents abroad I am as much Austin Friars & Co. as A. Friars & Co. himself," she persisted.

"I suppose so, for you wrote all or most of the letters."

"Very few of the people with whom business was transacted in London ever saw Mr. Friars. His fleshly representative was always a clerk or a boy—his spiritual representative was myself."

"It is quite true," Mr. Ross assented.

“Then what is to prevent the business being carried on by Y. Friars as well as it was by A. Friars?” she inquired.

“There are many reasons which strike me against such a plan,” Luke Ross said. “One you have yourself supplied. Under the late *régime* the business was *not* successful, and you propose to continue it on the old system.”

“No; we—that is you and I, Mr. Ross—were never allowed to work on any system. I was only suffered to obey orders, and you were latterly not even supplied with orders to obey. Mr. Friars did not know what he wanted himself, and yet he would not let anyone else tell him. We could have done more had we been let alone. You used to say so, Mr. Ross. I have heard you repeat a dozen times that, if he would only have drawn a certain sum of money out of the business yearly, and left the entire management to us, we could have made it valuable.”

“I believe we might, but times are not what they were then. Trade has been wretched lately,

and no doubt Mr. Friars will carry the best of his connection with him to Monteith's."

"He may try to do so," she remarked significantly. "Mr. Ross," she added passionately, "do you think me a perfect idiot? Do you not know that the sort of education I have had for years past has made me feel like a man, judge like a man? Do you imagine I am going to be either dependent upon the Monteiths for my daily bread, or satisfied with the thirty-five or forty pounds a year I should get from my thousand pounds if I invested it safely? Listen. I am willing to risk the thousand pounds for the sake of indulging my whim. If I do not lose it, well and good; if I do, well and good still. I have been a governess and a companion, and those two brilliant careers would still remain open to me, if the worst came to the worst. But there are parts of that business to which it would be impossible for me to attend. I could work, I could do the correspondence, I could see nothing was neglected; but I could not receive the people who

called, neither could I go about with draggled petticoats calling upon them. That is just the point where the fact of my being a woman comes in as an impediment; but if you will help me, if you will take that part, there need be no difficulty."

For a minute Luke Ross sat silent. Of course he had felt she was coming up to this point; equally as a matter of course he knew she counted securely on his answering her in the affirmative; but still he now remained silent, stunned almost by her lack of perception to the difficulties which presented themselves to his mind, and at a loss for any form of words by which he might convey to her the perplexities and impossibilities surrounding her scheme.

But Yorke, misunderstanding the cause of his silence, soon relieved him from all embarrassment. She proceeded to remark that although the certain income the business could at first afford might be small, yet that it would be larger than the salary he, Mr. Ross, was receiving from Messrs. Hurward & Gaskarth. She proposed,

she went on to explain, that a portion of the 1000*l.* should be mentally devoted to salaries, rent, and so forth. She enlarged upon the fact that, no matter how long he remained with Messrs. Hurward & Gaskarth, or how hard he worked for them, he could only hope to better his position a little; whereas, if this venture proved successful, he might ultimately make a large fortune.

She grew eloquent in advocacy of her plan, for she had set her heart on carrying out the scheme. Like all women, she had her "second thoughts" on the subject, which she kept to herself—reasons behind, reasons that she would not allow to appear; and because she held, or imagined she held, so much at stake in the matter, because she knew that without Luke Ross half her strength would be gone, she pleaded in behalf of the reasonableness and feasibility of her plan with all her heart, with all her tongue.

Language—the power of expressing her ideas forcibly and persuasively—had long been one of

her accomplishments; and now, putting out all her power, she appealed, and appealed successfully, to one strong trait in the man's nature—the desire to rise, the longing to be his own master, free to carve his way to position and fortune.

Yet still he remained silent; something stronger than ambition tied his tongue—regard for her.

Could he do this thing?—he who loved her, could he ever run the risk of having her name, stained though it might be, dragged through the mire of men's busy tongues, of women's slanderous insinuations? But how was he to tell her this?—how, unconscious, as she seemed of all evil, even hint that the possibility of wrong underlay her purpose? There was the difficulty—one which he knew would never have occurred to him had he not already loved her a thousand times too much, and that others suspected the fact.

And all the while his soul was yearning to accept the offer. Money! he did not value it now. Reputation! all social considerations faded

into insignificance beside the happiness of seeing her daily. His future! what could any future hold in comparison to such a present—to being her right hand, her very help in time of trouble?

They had worked together for hours, days, weeks, in the old times departed. While Austin Friars was absent, as towards the latter part of Luke's connection with him he was almost always absent, Mrs. Friars and he had really kept the business together: and what, therefore, more natural than that she should conceive the same thing might be done over again without harm ensuing to anyone?

And who was to think harm of it?—and if harm came, would it not be time enough to go out and meet the foe? Was he to put the hope and the promise—delusive though the one might be, and faithless the other—of his life aside merely because Mrs. Holmes and Miss Kate would object, and say naughty things concerning that “designing widow?”

O, if she had only been a widow! he thought

to himself; and then he lifted his eyes, and found that Yorke's were fastened upon him.

She was wondering why he did not answer her, why he had not something to say in reply to her scheme. She was vexed at his male stupidity, which failed, so she conceived, to grasp the full brilliancy of her plan as rapidly as she had devised it; likewise, perhaps, she was annoyed to find he was so little her slave as to hesitate about obeying any command she chose to utter.

The Luke Ross she once knew would have gone through fire and water for her, fetched and carried like a dog, was faithful also like a dog, had admired her as some lower type of creation may admire a superior intelligence. Whence, then, this change? She had fully believed he would jump at her proposal; that he would see this matter, as he had formerly seen all other matters, with her eyes; that he would only be "too" glad; and yet, after this belief and conviction on her part, there he sat without saying a word, not answering her even "yes" or "no," but looking

at the carpet, wrapped up in the citadel of a profound silence ;

Till their eyes met, when he began very gravely :

“I think, Mrs. Friars, you have not sufficiently considered this matter—”

“I have given it all the consideration I intend to do,” she interrupted. “We have been good friends hitherto, Mr. Ross. If we are to part, let us part still friends, without a word of advice coming between us. I will not follow advice, so it is useless your proffering it. I have made up my mind. You, of course, can do as you like—but I am resolved.”

And resolved she looked, as she sat holding her bonnet by its strings, while her hands were tightly locked together, and her eyes sparkled and shone in the firelight. There could be no mistake as to what she meant ; and the old verse, about the folly of trying to constrain a woman’s will, rose irresistibly to the man’s mind as he looked at her.

“Ah, well,” he thought to himself philosophi-

cally, "she is not the first, any more than she will be the last, to follow her own course, no matter where it may lead her. Since the time of to Cleopatra, there never was a woman unwilling pearls waste just to gratify a mere fancy, or, often as not, no fancy at all."

"I should like to think the plan over for a day or two," he said aloud; "I suppose my doing so will not inconvenience you?"

"Certainly not," she replied pettishly; "I cannot expect you to relinquish your assured position for the sake of pleasing me. Unless you are quite satisfied accepting my proposal will be to your pecuniary advantage, it would pain me to think you entertained it even for a moment. The whole thing is this: There is a business, and I have a thousand pounds. I believe a good income can be made out of the two; but if you believe otherwise, do not be influenced by me. Your decision cannot affect mine, though it may involve a little more trouble and anxiety in carrying through my plan."

There was a little sarcasm, a little passion, a little reproach, in her voice as she uttered this sentence, and the three together touched Luke disagreeably. When he had not a selfish thought, she imputed interested motives to him; when all he wanted was to do the best he could for her, she scoffed at and upbraided him—not in words truly, but in something stronger than words—in tones every accent of which he knew; for there was scarcely a note of that human instrument he had not heard touched in the days gone by.

Whatever the result might be, he felt he must cast in his lot with hers. He knew very well what her sentence meant; it said to him, “Be content, if you will, to stay for ever entering another man’s profits; retain your present brilliant position; refuse to believe in me or my scheme, if you like—it does not matter much to me. There are other men in the world besides Luke Ross, who will come to me for a salary, and feel thankful to get it; and when I have worked up a business without you; *then* you, in

whom I once trusted, will be sorry—then, when it will be too late.”

That was the English he understood of the words Yorke had uttered, for he knew her so well. There was not a mood or tense in her nature he believed he had not learned off by heart. When he used to be sitting in the office—since tenanted by Lorenzo & Co.—and heard her come in and pass up the staircase, it grew to be a fancy of his that there was a character even in the sweeping sound of her dress—that he could tell whether she were pleased or displeased, angry or sorry, tired or the reverse, by the rustle of her silk, by the pat of her feet, as she crossed the landing.

And to think that she should so misjudge him ! At any risk—yes, at any—he must tell her what the world might say ; and then, as she decided, he would abide.

He could not, however, tell her there—not amongst those musty books, with the light falling full upon her face, with not a chance of merciful

cover for the trouble he thought might change and darken her eyes—no, he would walk home with her ; he would tell her as they went, and, to put away all fear of his cowardice conquering him, he said :

“My reason for hesitating is not what you think ; so far as the mere money question is concerned, I could answer ‘Yes’ at once.”

“And what is your reason ?” she asked.

“We have said all we wanted to say here, have we not ?” he replied, somewhat irrelevantly ; if you will allow me to walk back with you, I can explain myself more fully as we go.”

She knew pretty well what was to follow after that ; she understood in a moment there was just the one thing between them which has always prevented, which must always prevent, a man and a woman working safely together ; and she felt, as she tied on her bonnet, and crossed the outer office, and descended the staircase, and passed into the night, that she would have given up her plan, given up all she hoped to make out

of it, could she only, by so doing, have retraced her steps, have put herself and Luke Ross where they stood a week previously.

But the thing was done past recall, and so, as they walked on side by side together, Yorke felt there was no use in fretting over the matter—that whatever he had got to say she must hear, and hear as best she might.

He would have been comparatively at ease if she had spoken—if she had asked him a single question which might lead them on to the topic he desired to broach by natural degrees; but she walked along in silence, and they had reached Scott's Yard before a suitable commencement occurred to him.

Then she said:

“I think I must not ask you in, Mr. Ross. For although Mr. Friars is at present away, it is still his house; and as you and he—”

“Then walk with me farther,” he interposed as she hesitated; “that is, if you are not tired; for there is something I must say to you to-night. I

cannot let you go judging of me as you must judge, unless I explain my motives."

"I know them," she answered softly; "or at least I guess them; and from your point of view you are right. We surely need not discuss the matter any farther."

And she would have parted with him then—glided out of this life, passed away from him like the dream-shadows that sometimes visit us in our sleep—if he would have let her.

But when it came to the point he could not bear it. "Hear me—only hear the little I have to say," he pleaded, "and then you shall decide. Walk with me farther, and don't think me selfish for asking this."

"Where shall we go?" she asked, turning back meekly, and speaking in a voice which was wonderfully low and wonderfully sad even for her.

"Anywhere," he answered, "so that it be quiet."

Again they wandered along together for a

while in silence, threading in and out of narrow lanes, which were quiet and still as death, from which all the noise and bustle of day had expired; Yorke wondering when he would begin to speak, and Mr. Ross searching about vainly for some form of words into which he might put all he desired to convey.

“We had better turn back,” Yorke at length suggested.

“No—come down here; forgive me, I will not keep you long.”

They had by this time arrived at Queenhithe, and they walked down towards the Thames—down to the very water’s edge—where they stood leaning against the wooden railing, which in those days terminated the end of the terrace, if such it could be called.

The Queenhithe of to-day is not that of some years back; but the Thames still ripples up to the landing-steps, and the water still reflects back the light of the lamps, and the prospect, spite of fresh warehouses, and railway-bridges, and railway

termini, is much the same as it was when Luke Ross and Yorke Friars stood there listening to the swish, swish, of the river as it washed the stones and the steps on its way to the sea.

Once again the silence remained unbroken, till at length Yorke said, "I really must go home now, Mr. Ross; good-bye, and——"

"A moment!" he interrupted,—"only one!"

The man's breath came short while he laid a detaining hand on her arm. There was darkness around them; there were only lights away in the distance; but still Yorke, listening to the rippling of the waters, with her face bent over the river, knew how he looked, felt what was coming.

"I have only one objection to make to your scheme, and that is what the world might think of it; but give me the right to stand between you and the world, and I will do anything you tell me. I love you—I have always loved you—I shall love you to the end."

He was desperate. He had fought with himself—sworn he would not do this thing—and yet

now in a moment the die was cast. Far away lay the old life ; there was nothing present, save the knowledge that he had cast himself adrift from the past for ever, and that the whole of his future lay wrapped up in a woman's "Yea" or "Nay."

The answer came. To Luke's fancy, it always came back to him borne by the river, dashed into his soul with the noise of many waters—with a rippling and gurgling and choking of the stream and of his own mad sorrow.

"You ask me what is impossible," she said ; and then, feeling him flinch and tremble, she took the hand which lay on her arm, and held it as though she would give him courage to bear his pain. "Not to grieve you with listening to other reasons why it may never be, let me tell you one—I am a married woman."

"It is false !" he cried in his agony,— "I know it is false—that it cannot be. Your secret is safe with me ; but still I know all your secret. Though Austin Friars called you his sister-in-law, I guessed

from the first how it was; for he never had a brother for you to have married—there never was one of the name but himself; and it was because I did know everything he most desired to keep hidden, that he hated me.”

“Was he not one of the Hertfordshire Friars, then?” asked Yorke; and her head seemed to reel and to dance, with the waters racing by and splashing up against the steps.

“No,” answered Luke Ross; and, forgetful of her, in his own anguish and anger and self-justification and self-exaltation, he dealt the blow right home. “Austin Friars is a foundling, and only gets his name from the place where he was left on a door step some thirty-four years ago.”

CHAPTER VI.

CONFESSION.

WHEN a woman mixes among a crowd, she must expect to be jostled and pushed by the sterner sex. And in like manner when a lady leaves that vantage-ground which her own feminine domain affords to every creature entitled to wear petticoats, and goes down where men wage fierce war together, she cannot complain if occasionally she receive a blow which quivers through every nerve of her body.

Even in the first smart of her pain Yorke Friars instinctively grasped this truth, and held her peace.

She had sense enough to know it is impossible for any one to be man and woman too ; that is to

say, she understood if a woman strayed either by choice or necessity into a man's position, she could not expect to be treated while there with that considerate tenderness which is due to those who keep themselves fenced in by every social propriety and protection.

She had elected that a man should talk to her as if she were a man; and it was not for her to cry out when even, in his love-making, he seemed to forget she was not so mentally strong as he. Besides which, Yorke knew enough, had seen enough, of the rank from which Luke Ross was drawn, to comprehend that even among the best of the men and the women composing it, a quick sensitiveness to the feelings of others, a lively appreciation of what may hurt and what may offend, is almost unknown.

They are a plain-spoken race even if they are not always straightforward; a delicate regard for the weak points in another human being's armour does not often hold back their hand. Like children in their charming frankness, in their almost

inconceivable non-comprehension of what may distress and annoy, they have a way of brushing up human hair the wrong way, and then if the sufferer remonstrate, they wonder why he does so; and if he do not remonstrate, it never occurs to them that the man has suffered torture at their hands.

There were not many things which fell within the sphere of her observation that Yorke Friars had failed to notice; and her knowledge of life standing her in good stead now, she remained for a few seconds silent looking at the water flowing by, silent whilst in the river, as from the face of a mirror, she seemed to see the full reflection of her misery and her shame: misery to have loved devotedly, sinfully, and been deserted; shame to have lavished the best treasures in her possession on a man whose life had been a long lie—a lie in everything save this, that he loved her; yea, for next best to himself Austin Friars did care for this woman whose heart he had well-nigh broken.

And there, out of the far distance—out where

the lamplight glimmered on the river, and the water seemed blacker than ever, close at hand where they stood—there arose another figure—one with fair shining hair and blue eyes, and an innocent child's face—such as she had heard described over and over again, such as she had beheld once or twice visioned in her dreams; a face belonging to some one not in the least resembling Yorke Friars, to some one who had never even beheld the likeness of sin—who was young as Yorke had been in the old days departed, days which could come back no more for ever—who was innocent as Yorke had been in her beautiful girlhood—who was guileless, and unsophisticated, and unsuspicious of evil, as Austin had found Yorke in the years which were gone and could never return again.

It seemed to rise out of the water and stand between her and the opposite shore, dim and shadowy—less because it was not a real presence, than because of the mist of tears through which

she beheld another woman's life about to be wrecked as hers had been.

No, not quite as hers had been, not quite ; and the difference lay in this, which she spoke aloud :

“ And, notwithstanding all, he is going to marry her.”

If ever Luke Ross were utterly confounded, it was with this speech. Through the darkness and the silence he had fancied Yorke struggling with her regrets and her indignation ; weighing, it might be, he thought in his vanity, the difference between him and the man who had deluded and betrayed her ; reflecting bitterly about Austin Friars, and contrasting his deceitful baseness with the love which offered to cover her shame under the shelter of an honest name, and, *knowing all*, take her for his wife.

During that pause he had let her alone, picturing these things ; and behold, in a moment, he found her mind had travelled beyond the boundary of her own appointed life, and was measuring Austin's conduct with regard to another.

“She hopes to get him back again,” was his bitter thought. “She imagines if Miss Monteith knew this it would break off the match; and very likely it might—very certainly, indeed, it would. And then with this knowledge she could almost compel Friars to marry her.” Having lashed himself up to which point, he said :

“Have you any intention of enlightening Miss Monteith on the subject?”

“No.” Yorke Friars turned and looked at him as she spoke—looked at him so steadfastly that, even in the imperfect light, he could not endure her gaze, and, averting his eyes, let them wander away over the water, as Yorke’s had done. “No, I could not do so; I could not betray the secret, and ruin the chances of the man I loved. Were it not, however, that I, of all people, am bound to keep silence about such a matter—I might go to Mr. Monteith and tell him.”

“I thought an anonymous letter was the most usual, as it is unquestionably the safest feminine plan.”

“You have been unfortunate in the women among whom your lot has fallen,” Yorke replied coldly; and drawing down her veil she would have left him, but that Luke laid a detaining hand upon her.

“I think I never saw a perfect woman till I beheld you!” he passionately exclaimed. “I think I never understood what the word ‘woman’ meant till now! I think, whatever in my mad sorrow I may have said,—and Heaven knows I have no memory now of much that has been said between us to-night,—I never met with any one so good, so tender, so holy—holy, spite of everything—as yourself.”

Then for the second time that night Yorke took his hand, and held it while she said :

“God help you!”

“And you, Yorke,—you will too,” he pleaded (how naturally he spoke the familiar name by which he had thought of her so long!). “It makes no difference to me, and I swear it shall make no difference to you. I could not love you more if I

were taking you away from your father's house. I could not love you so much if you were a young girl like Mary Monteith, and that the years during which you have been so wretched had never been."

Straight away over the water she looked, never answering. There, pictured on the dark river, was the scene his words had conjured up: her father's home, the setting sun, the garden, the distant woods; and she innocent! Ah, Heaven! innocent—so innocent, that an end like this seemed impossible. And then the picture passed away, and she beheld reflected, as from a mirror, her present. Clearly, as in a painting, she beheld a lonely deserted woman standing by the water's edge, who had in her shortsightedness, in her senselessness, because of her great love and her unfathomable folly, put it in the power of any man to show her what she was, clearly as Luke Ross had done.

What she was she never quite grasped till then—a woman who, in spite of her birth, her beauty,

her talent, her sweetness, had still fallen so low that a man like Luke Ross could not, in his gross stupidity, help revealing to her the depths from which he desired to raise her.

Well enough she understood that though he might not have loved her so well, had she remained all her life long sheltered from contact with the world, had she been young and fair and sinless as Mary Monteith, yet that still there would have been a difference likewise in his respect.

Further, she knew that in the old days she stood as high above such a man as now, in his estimation, she lay below; and though the old days had never quite departed from her, she felt utterly—as her tears fell silently drop by drop into the darkling river—that they existed for no one else.

“You will marry me, Yorke,” he whispered hoarsely when her silence and the splashing of the waters grew insupportable; and at sound of his voice the scene she had conjured up vanished, and there remained—whether for joy or for sorrow—only the reality of her life.

“ We must end this,” Mr. Ross, she began, and her tone was not so soft as it had been when she prayed God to help him. “ As I said before, what you ask can never be. For one thing, I am already married ; for another, I gave my heart away years ago ; and though it has now been returned to me, I find it—broken.”

“ How can I believe you to be married,” he said, “ when I know—”

“ I was married years before I ever met Austin Friars,” she interrupted ; “ and my husband is still living, and perhaps suffering too.”

She flung the information to him. She threw the tidings which were a death-blow to all his hopes, to all his visions, as she might have tossed something valueless or disagreeable from her ; and then she turned to the river again and watched her dead float by, whilst he was vainly fighting against the cruel enemy who had come to take his cherished idol away from him also.

“ Was he unkind to you ?” Luke at length steadied his voice to ask.

“He was as good and kind a man as ever breathed,” she answered.

“And you—but I have no right to ask——”

“Yes, you have,” Yorke said, suddenly facing round upon him. “Every honest man who asks a woman honourably to marry him—who offers her the best he has, and is willing to risk the whole of his future on the die of what she may turn out to be—has as much a right to ask as she has a right to decide whether or not she will explain.”

“That is what I mean,” he remarked; “I have no right to expect you will explain.”

“You want a story,” she answered; “you want to hear the worst of me. Five minutes since, you concluded there was that in my life which might well make me diffident about accepting any man’s love: but you were sorry for me; you thought the stain upon me had been more of another’s providing than of my seeking. Now you have conjured up a different picture and a worse. Already you have marked Austin Friars with the brand of villany, and me——”

“Do not be hard,” he entreated faintly. “I could not help judging, and you yourself say you left your husband for the sake of——”

“Stop!” she said, raising her hand as if to prevent his saying more. “I left my husband on our wedding-day, because I was young and senseless—because I had vowed vows which were false before God—because it came upon me all in a minute that it was my life, my liberty, my future, myself, I had sworn away! O Lord!” And, breaking off suddenly, she stretched her clasped hands out over the waters, and bent her head till it touched the wooden railings.

Can any lapse of time dull the edge of memory’s keen sword? Does the olden story seem any the less pathetic though it may not have been perused for years? Does the reality of any sorrow seem less terrible because years have come and gone since the hour when it became a part and parcel of our existence? When we are talking of the past troubles of our lives, dead and confined though they be, there yet comes every now and then a

torrent of suffering rushing through our hearts, that, seeming to suffocate us, stops for a moment the half-spoken sentence.

“O Lord!” went wailing out over the waters. It was the irrepressible cry of a soul wrestling alone with its anguish. It was the sob of humanity acknowledging the capability of its humanity for suffering. It was the confession of error—the lament which all utter some time or other in the present that is only partially theirs; over the past, which was all in possession, which they owned utterly, and out of which they might have moulded a different future.

Standing beside her silent—for he knew not what form of words to use in the presence of so bitter a grief—there came a comprehension to the man, that in comparison with the lurid lights of such an experience, the domestic lamps at Homer-ton burned dimly and feebly; that whilst, spite of its sin, its suffering, its repentance, its despair, such a life might fairly be called living, the days and weeks and months and years, as spent by his

unexceptionable relatives, could only be termed existing.

Before, he had been vaguely dissatisfied with himself, his home, and his surroundings; but now he began to understand the reason of that dissatisfaction—began to see why it was that this woman, spite of her sorrow and her shame, stood in his opinion so much nearer the angels than the girls—so called by their mamma—who duly put his slippers to warm, and gave him his second cup of tea before they added fresh water to that already in the pot, and made much pie of him generally, and hoped that some day he would marry Kate.

Already Luke Ross was scarcely the same man he had been when he entered Mr. Fulke's office—already, standing by the river's edge, that liberal education, previously mentioned, had begun—began in a different sense than that of making him merely discontented—it had commenced to enlarge his mind, to extend his sympathies, to teach him a wider charity, a more tolerant religion.

It is not from any mental valley, from any sequestered nook, however safe, that a human being can take an extended and comprehensive view of life; rather he must, if he would behold eternal truth, mount where he can see not merely the poor personal world which has hitherto confined his view, but the lives lived, the sorrows endured, the temptations resisted, by other men and women—brothers and sisters of his own, in the eye of God, though he has never hitherto acknowledged the relationship.

That it should ever have come to this! With an amazed surprise, Luke Ross felt, as he walked home to Homerton, that the old landmarks of his faith had been swept away, and that strange waters were rushing in over the arid land formerly his sole possession, to nourish, beautify, and clothe with gladness and with verdure.

“It is stupid of me,” Yorke began, after that pause of utter anguish,—“stupid of me to begin a story and break down in the middle.”

“Pray do not try to tell me any more,” Luke

entreated. "I would not have you pain yourself for the world; and besides, you may perhaps hereafter regret having said so much."

"No," she answered steadily, "I am not given either to half confidence, or to regret having given my full confidence afterwards. You have to-night—spite of your own judgment and your own good sense—offered me the whole of your life; and the only return I can make is to give you the history of mine. It is told in a sentence; you can fill in the details for yourself. A wife, I met Austin Friars, who, knowing nothing of my past, asked me to marry him. He was rich then; if you have known him long, you perhaps remember his being so. He was rich and I was poor. He visited at a house where I filled the enviable position of companion to an old lady, half blind, half deaf, and, in my opinion, half mad. We met often, we were thrown greatly together, and before I knew what it all meant—remember what a secluded life I had led—the mischief was done; and I loved him as I shall

never love another man again. It could not be, of course. I told him everything—told him as I am telling you to-night—”

(For a moment her voice faltered, while she remembered that the story had been differently recited then—recited with her head resting on his shoulder, and the tears falling like rain from her eyes.)

“And we agreed to separate, to put it all away from us, to leave our fairyland, and go out each alone. We did it; for six months he and I never set eyes one on the other. I do not know how it was done; I do not know how the days were passed; till he came to me and said he was ruined, that he must leave England, that he had got an appointment abroad; but that he could not leave without bidding me good-bye.

“And then I cannot tell you exactly how it was, nor how it came about; but remembering all the misery of those months during which we had tried to do right, looking at his altered face—thinking of his going away to a foreign country,

perhaps to die all alone—I agreed to go with him. I took my choice, and I do not know if that choice had to be made again, even with my present experience, whether I should not elect to travel the same road once more.”

“Do not say that!” Luke entreated.

“Why not, if it be the truth?” she demanded; “why should I gloss the matter over to you or myself, or God? If I repent, and I have repented with a fulness and an agony which I could never make you understand, it is not for my life wrecked, for my future blasted; but for the man whose life I have wrecked also, whose future I have blighted even more hopelessly than my own.”

“You have not wrecked his life!” Luke exclaimed.

“How can you tell?” she demanded with surprise, then suddenly added, “O you are thinking of Austin Friars, who I doubt not will settle down into a prosperous and respectable family man; whose portrait will hang over the

dining-room chimneypiece, and who will give many dinner-parties in the most orthodox style. I was not thinking of him, Mr. Ross, but of one better and truer and larger-hearted—the man who to this day has the misfortune to call me wife.”

“Why do not you return to him?” Luke asked, next moment to repent his question when she answered him with a sort of repressed fierceness:

“To the home from which I carried my youth and my innocence and my beauty, shall I take back my worn face, my burden of shame, the years that have passed over my head since then? If I were to do such a thing, if I could do such a thing, the dead, his dead, to whom a woman’s purity was as dear as a man’s honour, would rise up from their graves to drive me from the house. No; a present like mine renders a happier future impossible. And further, Mr. Ross, if the whole of the past were swept away; if I could be again as I was when I first came to London—with the mischief still reparable, the wrong still capable of

being righted—I do not think I could return. I did not love the man I married then; I do not love him now.”

Thinking it all over afterwards, Luke Ross wondered how it came to pass that all these things, which were so strange for her to speak, did not sound strange when she was uttering them.

It seemed natural that she should say just what she did say; and never had this man, who loved her so well and so hopelessly, thought her more tenderly womanly, more touchingly charming, than when she was telling him the story of her love for Austin Friars.

“You did not go abroad, after all,” he said after a pause, reverting to this point in her story.

“No,” she answered. “We got as far as Southampton, and then something suddenly occurred, I never knew exactly what, but something, at any rate, which prevented his getting the appointment. I think there were two persons who had the power of giving it, and that one did so without his partner’s consent. I was so distressed about

having to remain in England, that I gave very little attention to the reason why we had to do so. Even then I would have gone back to the house of a friend I had; but he was so poor and so lonely—”

She broke off abruptly, and covering her face with her hands, as though in the darkness Luke could see her tears, sobbed aloud.

“I can bear this no longer, Mr. Ross,” she began, when at length she could steady her voice; “I must go home.”

“Forgive me,” he said; “I have been much to blame; I should not have allowed you to talk about these matters.”

“It has done me good,” she answered; “it has taken the hardness out of me; talking about our past has put my evil thoughts concerning him away. I have not a bad feeling now; and I can hope with all my heart and with all my soul that he may be happy and prosperous and good.”

Hard to bear all this, hard to endure the sight and sound of such passion about a man who had

left her; while he, Luke Ross, would have given the best years of his life to see one of those tears shed for him.

But he bore it bravely, less like the man he was than like the man he ultimately became. Assuming a different manner from any she had ever seen him wear before, he took her hand and drew it within his arm.

“One word on business,” he said, as they walked slowly up Queenhithe; “from what you have said to-night I gather that your husband is wealthy.”

“Very wealthy,” Yorke answered; and her heart gave a great throb of gratitude as she remembered that her companion had known none of her antecedents, nothing whatever about her save her sorrow; that to him she had been “only a woman,” only *the* woman when he offered to trust his name and his future to her keeping: for her sex, though they love to surround themselves with every circumstance of wealth and rank, with every accessory of dress and social consideration likely to attract the fancy of men, are yet always proud

to feel it is for none of these things they have been sought—that they are wooed with as unmercenary an affection as that King Cophetua felt for the beggar-maid.

“Then,” Luke went on, “do you not think, although you cannot return to him, your husband would rather settle some annuity upon you than know that one so near to him was struggling to earn money—was short of anything he could provide?”

“He would give me, I do not doubt, whatever income I chose to ask—unless—unless—” and then she stopped dead. “I could not take it, Mr. Ross,” she resumed abruptly; “I could not touch his money, having left him; I would rather go and be governess or companion again—I would rather beg my bread than ask it from him.”

“But if some one else asked it for you?” he said.

“I meant, take it from him,” she answered. “Mr. Ross, please do not let us talk about this any more; I am quite decided in the matter.”

“And you really mean to persist in your intention of carrying on Mr. Friars’ business?”

“Yes,” Yorke replied; “I am quite decided about that also.”

“If such be the case,” Luke began, “I require no longer time for deliberation. My sole objection to the plan was, what the world might think of it—might say of you—of—”

“If you do not care, I do not,” she interrupted. “The world and I shook hands long ago; to its good opinion or its bad I am equally indifferent, as long as I know myself, just what I do know, the best and the worst of my own position.”

“I wish you would not speak so bitterly,” he remonstrated; “it grieves me to hear you—you whose good name is far dearer to me than my own.”

He felt the hand resting on his arm clasp it for a moment, then she said softly :

“Mr. Ross, I am grateful to you, and I will try to do what you ask. God has been very good to send me so staunch a friend in my hour of need.”

“That is what I want to be,” Luke answered; “such a friend as a father or a brother might prove. I put away from this hour the hopes I had indulged in. I will help you to the best of my ability, work with and for you with all my heart and strength. You need not be afraid to trust me; for such words as I have spoken to-night shall never be uttered again.”

She could not answer him in language, but she touched his sleeve with her lips, and this mute action was eloquent to Luke as a volume of oratory.

If he dare have taken her then—if he only dare have clasped her to his heart, and kept her there safe, and shielded from all trouble and sorrow, he felt that life would have been too full of happiness for him.

What did her shame and her wrong matter to him now; of what consequence did all the impediments concerning which he had fretted himself signify in comparison to the great barrier which now reared itself in his sight!

“Married!” he kept repeating mentally as he walked home that night—“married!—ah, if she were only single, I would love her so much that I would make her love me!—poor desolate heart, poor lonely Yorke!”

That was the one boon he had prayed before they parted: “I do not mean it as an impertinence,” he said; “but let me call you by your Christian name.”

Well enough she knew why he preferred this request; but yet for an instant she hesitated, hurt at all his sentence implied.

It was only for an instant, however, that this pain lasted; then gracefully and trustfully she said:

“Let it be so, then; as we are to work together, brother and sister, or rather man and man, you shall be Luke, and I Yorke, from this night forward!”

And then they clasped hands under the old archway leading into Scott’s Yard; and he watched her flitting along the pavement, and enter the house where he was soon to cast in his lot with her.

She had asked a good deal from a cautious man; but he did not repent his decision. Nay, on the contrary, he felt mad with happiness to think that though he could never be to her what he wished, yet that they need not be parted again—that he should see her each day—that their lives were to be, after a fashion, intertwined, and their interests separate no more.

Pondering these things—feeling as though he were treading on air, looking forward to the new life opening before him, thinking of the weeks and months during which he had not even caught a sight of her dress in the distance—he remembered what she had said about herself and Austin Friars: “I do not know how it was done; I do not know how the days were passed.”

“And after all, he could leave her!” Luke exclaimed aloud; and then he muttered a curse on the man who had won such love—won and worn it—only to cast it aside like a faded flower, for men to trample over it if they would.

CHAPTER VII.

SLIGHTLY UNEXPECTED.

ABOUT the same hour when Yorke and Luke Ross parted in Bush Lane, Austin Friars was knocking at the door of a house on Denmark Hill. It was one of those large old-fashioned mansions which are rapidly disappearing from the suburbs—those great countrified-sort of habitations that it pleased our wiser forefathers to build near town, at a time when comfort was more considered than mere appearance, ere slight stucco had usurped the place of honest red brick, or a vision of “handsome elevations” had driven out of the minds of architects and builders all memory of closets and cupboards, of delicious little ante-rooms and charming surprises of unexpected quaintness.

In the days when those good old mansions were erected, men who had made their money hardly would not have taken a house out West at a fabulous rent, even for the sake of dating their letters from a fashionable neighbourhood, if the said house had not so much spare ground belonging to it as might serve to tie up a dog.

They had a strong notion, those worthy citizens, of getting their money's worth for their money. Not alone for the ladies of the family was the house taken and the house furnished. Men in former times entertained an absurd and now justly-exploded idea that, as bread-winners, they had as much a right to have their tastes gratified as their womenkind; and it says much for the progress and civilisation of the nineteenth century that the fair sex, who are, as a whole, now less useful and more extravagant than has ever been the case before in the chronicles of England, have routed this ridiculous impression out of the minds of their natural protectors.

We all know that, as civilisation advances, so

woman finds her proper place; when civilisation is perfect, imagination loses itself in marvelling where her proper place will be.

As for Mr. Collis, the owner of Meadow House, his opinion on the subject was not very different from that of Shakespeare; but then his ideas on most subjects were strong and old-fashioned, like his house; and when his sister, who managed his servants and ordered his dinners for him, sometimes hinted at the desirability of moving to a more cheerful locality, he always pooh-poohed her with—

“Nonsense, Anne; at your time of life, you ought to know better. What can you want with fashion? for that is what you really mean, though you describe it as cheerfulness. All the fashion in the world won't get you married now, so you may as well make up your mind to the inevitable.”

This was Mr. Collis' style, and a very bad style many persons considered it to be; but, spite of his manners, which were *brusque*, and his frank expressions of opinion, he had walked through

life for nearly seventy years without making any real enemies, whilst at the same time he had secured some staunch and attached friends.

Amongst the latter, however, could not be reckoned Mr. Friars, who disliked Mr. Collis with an intensity which was only neutralised by his hope of the "old fellow" doing something handsome for him when he departed this life. Never either, in Austin's boyhood or manhood—never, either, when he was rich or when he was poor, had the pair met without that sort of skirmishing taking place between them which engenders feelings of hatred quicker than even an actual quarrel.

From the time when Mr. Collis had been in the habit of ordering Austin—then a handsome child in petticoats, given to claw papers about, and leave sticky fingermarks on books—out of his office, and threatening to administer summary chastisement if he ever caught him there again, Mr. Friars had disliked his patron; while his patron disliked the boy and the man, in whom

he recognised that cunning and plausibility which were his abomination.

For these and other reasons hereafter to be mentioned, the pleasure of Mr. Friars' company had never been even requested or offered at Meadow House, and not oftener than three or four times in his life had he ever crossed the threshold of that home, where Mr. Collis sat under the shadow of his own vine and fig-tree—where he ate the peaches gathered off his own sunny garden-walls, and in the summer evenings had out his wine and smoked peacefully on his own grass-plot, which was shaded by fine old timber from the glare of the setting sun.

When Austin Friars thought of that well-appointed and comfortable house—when he considered the extent of Mr. Collis' wealth—when he reflected upon the balance the worthy merchant kept at Smith Payne's—when he calculated how much money he would leave at his death—he always swore, either mentally or audibly.

For to that house—to that balance—to that

mass of property Mr. Friars considered himself entitled, and had always considered himself entitled. He believed as firmly he was Mr. Collis' son as he believed the old gentleman had never acted a father's part towards him.

Although he had been educated, clothed, fed, and put out in the world at Mr. Collis' expense, no feeling of gratitude had ever found a place in his heart towards this man whom he now came to see. Rather he looked, when he was admitted, at the wide hall and spacious staircase with a sensation of jealous anger, because he had never been asked to enter that house as heir—to pace its rooms and passages as its prospective master.

He was first ushered into a small breakfast-parlour, whilst the butler went to learn whether his master could see the visitor; for Mr. Collis was by no means an accessible individual, who laid himself open to the chance calls of stray acquaintances, or the still more objectionable raids of people asking for subscriptions, and wanting money for all sorts and manners of purposes.

And this check, slight and perfectly natural though it was, again ruffled Mr. Friars' temper, and caused him to mutter many and various naughty words during the period that the servant remained absent.

"Will you walk this way, sir?" the man at length returned to say; and Austin Friars followed him into the dining-room, where he found Mr. Collis seated near a splendid fire, with his wine beside him and his snuff-box conveniently near at hand.

"How do, Friars?" said the merchant, extending his hand more cordially than his wont. "I was just thinking about you. No, you need not quote the old proverb, though it might be applicable enough in this case. Sit down. What wine do you take?"

"Claret," Mr. Friars answered, perhaps because he saw it was not on the table; at all events, Mr. Collis thought this must be his reason, for he smiled as he rang the bell, and smiled again—not pleasantly—when he found Austin's eyes fixed on his face.

"Disagreeable weather, is it not?" he remarked.

"Detestable," his visitor agreed.

"Anything fresh in the City?" he inquired.

"Not that I am aware of," Mr. Friars replied.

"I must apologise for making so late a visit," he went on; "but having called frequently at the office lately in the hope of seeing you, without result, I thought I would come out here, as I wanted particularly to speak to you."

"I am sorry you should have had so much trouble," the other answered. "I have been rather uncertain lately; but had you dropped me a line mentioning your desire, I would have endeavoured to keep an appointment."

"You are very kind," Austin said; but the expression of his face belied his words. "The fact is, I am about to take a very important step."

"Of what nature?"

"I am going to marry."

"Whom?"

“Miss Monteith—daughter of Monteith & Co.”

“My good fellow, do you mean a daughter of Monteith, or of the Company, and if so, which of the Company? Do not be nervous; explain yourself clearly.”

“I am not at all nervous; and I am about to marry Miss Monteith.”

“Any money?”

“I imagine she will have a large fortune at her father’s death; but it would ill become a pauper like myself to inquire too closely into such matters.”

“Quite right. And the other woman?”

“Sir!” Austin angrily exclaimed; then as suddenly calming down, he added, “The other woman, as you are pleased to call her, and I have parted for ever.”

There was not a tremor in his voice while he said this; but his heart seemed to drop within him when, his words striking back upon his ear, he grasped that they were true.

“Do you remember three years ago assuring me you were married to her?” Mr. Collis demanded.

"Perfectly ; but a man is not bound to criminate himself," the other replied.

"True ; but if a man declare to you upon his word of honour that he is married to a woman, although, for various family reasons on the lady's side, it is expedient the fact should remain concealed (I quote from memory, but I believe my recollection serves me fairly), one may be excused for crediting the statement. I confess, however, I did not believe you, and therefore your present assertion fails to surprise me."

"I considered at the time it was a question you had no right to ask," Mr. Friars said defiantly, "and that I was at perfect liberty to answer as I thought best."

"Of which liberty you availed yourself to the fullest extent," remarked Mr. Collis.

"May I inquire what all this has to do with the fact of my engagement to Miss Monteith?"

"It has nothing to do with me. I should have thought, however, it might signify to Miss Monteith."

"Of course she is not aware — and I never intend her to be aware," Austin began.

"May I inquire, then, who Mr. Monteith thinks the lady is; for he cannot, of course, be ignorant of her existence?"

"My sister-in-law, as every one else imagines. I told you this when you spoke to me on the subject before."

"And do you not fear her enlightening your intended wife?"

"Certainly not. Yorke is true as steel."

"You and she parted, I presume, when first you contemplated marrying Miss Monteith? Excuse me, but as I have seen this widow of your deceased brother, I cannot help feeling a little curiosity in the matter."

"We parted when I told her I was engaged to Miss Monteith."

"And what is she going to do?"

"I do not know," Austin answered.

"You wish to provide for her—is that what you have come to talk to me about?"

"No; she will take nothing from me," was the reply.

"Except what you ought to have given her long ago, I suppose?" Mr. Collis said sharply.

"She *could* not take that," Austin answered, with a certain sense of triumph. "If she could, she should have borne my name years since."

"Are you speaking the truth, now?" the other demanded.

"As we shall all have to speak it some day," Mr. Friars replied, with that manner which often induced the older man to entreat him not to be a humbug. Now, however, he only said:

"That makes it all the worse for her."

"Of course it does," Austin agreed; "but what can I do?"

"You might stay single till the husband either die or give her a divorce. There are cases and cases, as there are women and women; and I think this is a case where you are bound to make her reparation, if in your power."

"It is not in my power, as I have told you,"

was the answer; "and as for staying single any longer, that, too, is impossible. I mentioned to you some time since that things were almost at their worst with me; that I did not know which way to turn; that every venture I tried left me in a worse position; that not a solitary scheme prospered with me; that my business was a shadow; that there was nothing substantial about me except my liabilities."

"Yes, I recollect your making some such speech on the occasion of my declining to advance you two thousand pounds more. You will admit that neither the picture you drew nor the security you offered was inviting."

"It was on different grounds I considered it not improbable you might assist me. I believe, indeed I had substantial reasons for thinking, you were entitled to afford such help."

"By Jove, that's cool!" remarked Mr. Collis, helping himself to another glass of wine, and pushing the claret towards his visitor. "Do you know how much I have lost by you, first and last?"

“I never went exactly into the calculation,” the other replied. “I never looked upon the money I owed you as a debt.”

“The approach of matrimony seems to have had a remarkable effect upon you : it has made you actually frank ; go on—I like this.”

“I have nothing more to remark,” Mr. Friars proceeded. “I considered the sums you advanced gifts ; reluctantly made, it is true, but still such gifts as—”

“As what ? For Heaven’s sake, let us have no uncompleted sentences. As—”

“A father might give and a son might take, even although the relationship between them had never been even privately acknowledged,” finished Austin defiantly.

It was a sight to behold the two men look at each other in the moment’s silence which succeeded this speech : Austin, thrown back in his chair, an angry sneer curling his thin lips, but yet with an anxious expression in those eyes that Yorke thought of so often ; Mr. Collis, cool as an

east wind and about as pleasant, leaning slightly forward in order apparently to obtain a better view of the individual who had been good enough to explain his ideas so fully.

There was not a trace of likeness between them, not the slightest. Mr. Collis had a high broad polished forehead, with great bumps appearing at unexpected and unusual points on the surface; his eyes were deep-set and shaded by shaggy eyebrows. He had a nose like the bill of a big cockatoo, hooked, but blunt at the point, while his mouth was large and opened freely, differing in this respect from that of Austin Friars, which, though delicate and refined in its shape and expression, did not convey the least notion of frankness, but rather that of reserve and discontent.

The younger man was cast altogether in a much finer mould than his senior, who said, after a moment's pause:

“So you are still harping upon that old string?”

“And mean to harp on it,” Austin retorted, “till I get some satisfactory information as to who

and what I am. It is high time there should be an end to all this mystery and mystification. I have come to-night to ask you who my mother was, and why, though you have never married and have no other children, you will not tell even me, to whom you have given the education of a gentleman, the exact relationship in which we stand to each other."

"I can soon set your mind at ease on the latter point," Mr. Collis replied. "I am your half-uncle."

"My what?" the other demanded.

"I am your mother's half-brother, so I suppose I must be your half-uncle," answered Mr. Collis. "I quite agree with you, there ought to be an end to all this mystery; and it was in connection with that matter I was thinking of you when you appeared. I had a letter this morning—" And the speaker thrust his hand into the breast-pocket of his coat, from whence he produced a bundle of those miscellaneous papers without which no City man seems able to exist.

Putting on his spectacles, he looked over these papers carefully, and at last extricated from the envelope of another letter a sheet ornamented with a deep black border, on which were traced these lines :

“ DEAR SIR,—I am very sorry to inform you of the death of my beloved wife, your sister, which occurred this morning at half-past three. She suffered much; and as my limited means prevented my giving her those comforts and luxuries which her state of health rendered necessary, I cannot on her account help feeling grateful to God for having removed her to a world where she will be better provided for. To me, as you must know, her loss is irreparable. Under present circumstances, twenty pounds by return of post would be esteemed by

“ Yours truly,

“ ROBERT BISHOP.

“ Half-notes could be sent, in separate envelopes.”

When he had ended reading this epistle, which he finished even to the postscript, Mr. Collis laid down the letter, and, placing his hand upon it, said :

“ The person here referred to was your mother. Do you wish to know more ?”

“ I wish to know all,” the younger man answered.

“ Well, then, you shall ; for her death removes that seal of secrecy from my lips which I most foolishly promised to respect. When he was quite old enough to have known better, my father married for his second wife a handsome, showy, unprincipled sort of woman, to whom, at his death, he left every disposable sixpence he owned in the world. By this woman he had one living child—the Mrs. Bishop mentioned just now—who grew up to be like her mother, handsome and showy also. There, however, the resemblance ceased. Whereas the mother was unprincipled, the girl was foolish ; while the mother, wise and wide-awake enough in other matters, did not see that her daughter was as far as possible from what

a discreet and prudent young woman ought to be."

At this point Mr. Collis stopped, put the letter back amongst the other papers in his pocket, took off his spectacles, poured out a fresh glass of wine, sipped about half of it, and resumed :

" One snowy morning the housekeeper at my place in Austin Friars came and told me a child had been left over-night on the door-step ; that she had taken it in—being a soft-hearted, foolish sort of creature, fond of babies, like all women who are not fonder of dogs and cats—taken it in, stripped it, found that its clothes were of a superior quality, and that there was a ten-pound note stitched to some part of its dress. She asked my advice as to what she should do with the child, and, as usual in cases where people ask advice, failed to follow it when given. I suggested sending it to the poor-house, or giving it in charge of the police ; but she said she should like to keep it, and I told her she was welcome to do so, if she would gag it during the day. She cried a good deal I remem-

ber, and asked me to change the ten-pound note. After a little while she came to me again, to know what she should call it ; and remembering the manner in which she had treated my former advice, I told her not to torment me about the matter. ‘You cannot do better than call him Austin Friars,’ I said ; and never thought more of the subject till a week later, when she informed me she had been to church and got you christened by that name. ‘What the devil possessed you to do such a thing ?’ I asked. ‘You told me, sir,’ she answered. Well, the mischief was done. Austin Friars you were baptized ; Austin Friars you have grown up.”

“And my parents ?” inquired the man who had sat listening quietly to this pleasant story.

“After a time, my sister was good enough to pay me a visit at my office, and tell me all about it. Poor soul ! I was very sorry for her then ; I have been very sorry for her often since. She was one of those people, in fact, who go through life eliciting an enormous amount of pity. I am sure

I expended more upon her than on any human being before or since."

"She, then, was my mother," Mr. Friars suggested in a dry hard tone.

Looking at him, Mr. Collis refrained from telling all the story—from mentioning the exact position his father had occupied—till Austin himself compelled the revelation.

"It was a peculiarity of your mother that she never came to see me excepting when in trouble," the merchant proceeded; "and accordingly the moment I saw her enter my office and go down on her knees, and seize my hand and kiss it—her usual mode of proceeding—I knew there must be something very much amiss. By degrees I found out that she had got entangled with some fellow who was a mere adventurer, and who, caring nothing for her, but caring considerably for her money, wanted her to marry him—after your birth, remember. I settled that matter, however, and shipped him off to the colonies, where he died some twenty years ago."

“And by what right, sir, did you dare to prevent their marriage?” Austin inquired.

“Well, first by your mother’s request,” answered Mr. Collis; “and second, because, when a man of the world sees a girl about to be sacrificed to a scoundrel, he has a right to interfere and save her.”

“Why do you call him a scoundrel—he may have been as honest a man as you?”

“I hope he was not; or to speak more correctly, I hope I am a more honest man than it was ever possible for him to be.”

“What was his rank in life?”

“Were I a punster, which, thank God, I am not,” answered Mr. Collis, “I should say he was in the world’s rank-and-file. To speak perfectly intelligibly, he filled the position of footman in your grandmother’s establishment.”

“Still I fail to see—” began Austin; but here Mr. Collis interrupted him.

“Lord help you!” he said; “if you are resolved to have the whole story, have it. The man was a lie from beginning to end. He got his situation

by fraud; he was dishonest in it; he had been convicted before; death would have been preferable to a lot linked with his. He wanted your mother's money, or at least the money he supposed she would have; and had the dastardly meanness to hold you as a threat over her, to induce her to marry him. In those days I was young as you are now, and I had my gentleman in my office and spoke my mind to him about the whole affair. The day your mother, then a wife, heard he was dead, she sent fifty pounds to Bartholomew's Hospital as a thank-offering."

For a minute there was silence, then Austin Friars, starting to his feet, exclaimed in a paroxysm of passion :

"It was cruel, knowing all this, to have made me what I am, to educate me up in order that I might feel the depth of my degradation more keenly; to give me the tastes and habits of a class who, if they even imagined what you have told me to-night, would shun me as they might a leper."

“I think you wrong the Londoners there,” Mr. Collis remarked coolly. “Provided a man be wealthy, I do not imagine they care particularly who his father may have been, or whether indeed he ever had one. Dives here—even though his baptismal certificate be not exactly in form—fares better than Lazarus, who can perhaps trace back to the Saxon kings, and who had never a blot save poverty on his escutcheon. That it was an unkindness to educate you so highly, I am sure ; and had my sister followed my advice, she would, instead, have brought you up to some honest trade.”

“You wear such stout shoes yourself, you have no feeling for another man’s corns,” his visitor remarked.

“I advised her to bring you up to some honest trade,” Mr. Collis repeated, taking not the slightest notice of this interruption ; “but, poor soul, you were her first, and she thought nothing good enough for you, till she married and became a mother again. By that time the harm was done.

You had been placed in a clergyman's family, as you recollect; there was a liberal sum paid yearly for your board and instruction; you were to go to Eton and thence to college; and there was a future before you of which—had you been prudent—you might have made a good thing."

"Am I to understand, then, that my mother paid for my education?" Austin inquired.

"She was to have paid for it," Mr. Collis replied; "but her promises, like her good intentions, were seldom fulfilled. After her marriage also she had not—owing to the absence of all marriage settlements—much power either to give or to withhold; and it did not take her husband long to run through every shilling she brought him. Mr. Bishop first spent his own money, then he spent hers, and then he desired to spend mine."

"I should think he did not succeed there," Mr. Friars remarked bitterly.

"Yes, indeed; during the course of the last ten years he has kindly disbursed for me about

twenty-six hundred pounds, and over his wife's death he will probably spend a few hundreds more. Of course, when she wrote they were starving, or had the bailiffs in the house, or made some other equally pleasant communication, I could not help assisting her. First and last, the pleasure of having your mother for a relation has not been enjoyed without expense."

"Then you paid for my education—you sent me to college—you started me in life?" Austin questioned.

"Yes. I did not like you—I am quite frank, you see—"

"Rather unpleasantly so," the other remarked ;
"but go on, it does not hurt me."

"I did not like you—as child, as boy, as man ; but I thought you had been put in my way, and that I would do my duty by you ; and I believe I did more than my duty. Remember I want no thanks—I expect no gratitude. You were simply an experiment, and you failed—you failed in truth, straightforwardness, and steadiness. I put

you in the way of getting rich, and you are poor; I have helped you to right yourself over and over again, and, spite of my assurances that you were not my son, you persisted in taking every sovereign I gave you as a right. Knowing you were illegitimate, you told every one you belonged to a good family; knowing you had wronged a woman, and were living with her in sin, you lied to me about that; whenever you were short of money, you have come to me with falsehoods in your mouth as to the cause of that shortness. I have weighed you in the balance—I have been weighing you all your life—and found you wanting; but still I am sorry for you, Austin. I think you are miserably placed; and rather than see this marriage go on, I am willing to come to the rescue once more, and try if it be not possible, without Miss Monteith, to put you on your legs again.”

For about the space of time in which a person could have counted five, Austin Friars looked at Mr. Collis—looked at him, as if trying to understand his meaning. Then with a mad oath he

flung back the offer, and dared him to try and stop the marriage.

“The girl would not thank you,” he said; “and as for her father—”

“He is a fool,” finished Mr. Collis. “Come and talk to me in the City to-morrow after you have slept on it all. If you will go, good-night.”

“Good-night,” Austin answered sulkily. And without the ceremony of hand-shaking, the pair separated.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. FRIARS IS CURIOUS.

WHATEVER a man may be, no matter how bad, how uninteresting, there is no question that when his punishment comes upon him his flesh quivers under the lash just the same as if he were the tenderest and most virtuous of mortals.

Sorrow, like pain, stings the saint and the sinner into a wonderful identity of suffering. For the time being the feelings of the two are so similar that the spectator forgets in his sympathy to remember which merits his pity most; or if he recollect he should make a difference between the twain, he rather inclines to bestow it on him who, when he loses the good things of this life, loses everything, and who has not a delightful

consciousness of his own goodness and a certain assurance of ultimate reward to support him under the world's cat.

There is a deeper depth into which the soul of such a man descends, when, having endured his punishment, he draws his conventional garments over his raw wounds and goes out alone with his pain, that few saints would care to fathom; a mental hell, in which he feels himself man-forsaken and God-forsaken; and while he abides there he believes in nothing save his own agony, and disbelieves in everything—even in the soothing influence of time.

As Austin Friars drove back to town after his conversation with Mr. Collis, he made one of those mental descents of which I have spoken. He was wild with rage and grief and disappointment. He had girt up his loins and put on his armour for the battle, confident almost of victory. He had gone down meaning to wring a "confession" out of the old man; and now that he had elicited it, behold the result! Not the Philistine, when,

struck by the pebble of his adversary the ruddy-faced shepherd-boy, he fell back dead, was more utterly discomfited than Austin Friars after hearing the history of his birth.

As on a winter's morning we brush aside a cobweb, glittering all white and beautiful in the frosty sunlight, so Mr. Collis swept away the illusion of his nephew's life—that illusion which had largely contributed to make him what he was. And in lieu of his illusion what remained? Austin bitterly asked himself as he drove home. Friendless, penniless, hopeless, he stood now in existence, with only one uncertain plank between him and the sea of utter despair. There was nothing left to him save Mary Monteith. And even with that chance Mr. Collis had intimated a desire to meddle.

“Only let him!” thought Austin. “Only—” and he clenched his hands and ground his teeth, as a finish to the sentence—“for I am desperate, and I shouldn't much care what I did;” all of which must be taken as merely the strong expressions of a weak man—a man so

weak that, because of his very impotence, he reviled and detested those whom he regarded as his enemies.

And yet, look you, friends, it was very hard—as he himself had said—to give any one the ideas, education, surroundings of a gentleman, and then in a moment show him the length and depth and width of the social gulf which separated him from those with whom he had hitherto mixed on terms of social equality.

For even illegitimacy has its ranks,—yes, madam, I speak the truth, though it suits society verbally to ignore the fact, all the while that it is asking to dinner with many urgent invitations the son of a duke, about whose mode of coming into the world there is much uncertainty, and sternly refusing the *entrée* to John, born in lawful wedlock of honest but poor parents;—illegitimacy has its ranks; and Austin had always considered his illegitimacy belonged to rather a respectable class; but now he was suddenly and awfully awakened from his delusion.

The *faux pas* of a woman is looked on, and rightly, to be less pardonable than that of a man; and in like manner the social descent of a woman in matters of this sort is, rightly again, viewed with more instinctive disfavour than the social descent of a man.

Though he had not mixed in the great world; though lords and marquises were delicacies quite beyond the reach of Austin Friars even in his best days; still he was sufficiently of the world to understand all this—to know that whereas society would virtuously turn its shapely back on the illegitimate offspring of Miss Collis and her mamma's footman, it might yet not hesitate to extend a couple of fingers towards a tangible error of Mr. Collis' youth; particularly if Mr. Collis behaved handsomely in the matter, and made up for what Austin lacked as regarded blood by providing him with a sufficient amount of bone.

He had desired both—this man of whom I am talking—he had deceived many a one beside

Yorke with stories of how he was connected with the Hertfordshire Friars, and could claim kin with one of that family who fought at Marston Moor; and he had firmly believed he should be left heir to all Mr. Collis' property: to his house, with its admirable appointments; to the apricots that ripened in the autumn sun; to the mulberry growing opposite the dining-room window; to the plate, that only on rare occasions saw the light; to the cellar of choice wines, and the old-fashioned but substantial and convertible furniture; to the well-established business, the head-quarters of which were in Austin Friars itself; and to the large balance at Smith Payne's that Austin Friars, the man, had often in imagination reduced.

These things he had owned, mentally, a hundred times over, and now, not even mentally, could one of them ever be his again. When, with horrid precision, Mr. Collis informed him of his exact position in the social scale—his position, that is, so far as money or birth could decide it—

Austin felt that hope died out; his heart sickened within him—he grew faint and weary; he had scarcely spirit enough left even to be angry; he was as one stricken by some mortal disease when he left the house and went out into the night with a sense of new and strange desolation upon him.

Then there ensued the sort of battle I have tried to describe, the depth of despair I have asked you to look down into; while mingling with and pervading all his other thoughts came the memory of Yorke—the only creature on earth who could have comforted him at that juncture, but between whom and himself he had raised a barrier as high as time—as long as eternity.

Back to the old home in Scott's Yard the man's weary eyes turned regretfully, and, as he recalled the soft outstretched hands that had always greeted his return, as he heard in imagination the low voice which he never remembered to have spoken any words save those of love, counsel, or welcome, he felt that something very good and

very sweet had eluded his grasp. He tried to secure too much, and lo! this was the result—an uncertain future without Yorke.

Without Yorke! Ah, well, we cannot have always a prudent match and the heart's best love—we cannot always secure a millionaire for father-in-law and a woman beyond price for wife. Given a woman sensible as Yorke Friars, dowerless, and a prospective heiress, and even Yorke Friars shall tell you which a man will choose. For the characteristic of the nineteenth century—at least of that part of it in which God has cast our lot—is discontent, and the man or the woman who can give a woman or man loaves and fishes without working for them is the individual able immediately to secure a partner for life.

Whether the partnership answer in all cases, is quite another question—one which you and I, reader, are never likely to know much concerning, since it cannot be dissolved by “mutual consent,” after the fashion of an ordinary business transaction. If it could, how many, I wonder, would

remain this night one; how many would "cry off," and how many would exclaim, "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God!"

It is not the marriage-tie which hangs so terribly on men nowadays, but rather the women men marry. Given two bright eyes and a pair of pink cheeks, and shall these things content a husband when the evil days come on him? Shall a large chignon and an elaborate walking costume satisfy the male creature, who has had to pay for both, when creditors are clamouring at his door, and the wife of his bosom can think of no surer means of consolation than a fit of hysterics, and a frantic wonder as to what poor mamma would feel if she only knew the strait in which her darling Jemima Jane was placed?

The longer men live in this world, the better they comprehend how seldom a wife proves in any sense a helpmeet to her husband, and the more highly they estimate those rare women who fulfil Solomon's idea of what the mistress of a house should be.

To Austin Friars, Yorke had been all and more the wise king of Israel, who acted so foolishly, described: prudent he found her, and thrifty, wise and gentle, long-enduring, full of a gracious tenderness; but, beyond all this, she was the love of his heart, the love of his love, the woman to whom, through all the years to come, whether in sunshine or whether in storm, his soul flew back continually, like a dove seeking shelter and shade, and seeking it vainly.

And this was prefigured to him that night as he drove home from Meadow House to his chambers near Piccadilly. Spite of his reverses he had never relinquished those chambers, save for the few weeks when he believed he was going abroad, but kept them on, apparently as an assurance to himself that he was still not utterly down in the world, not a mere struggling citizen without a hope save of ultimately renting a semi-detached villa at Dalston or Camden Town.

All his life long Austin had detested the "mill," as he called business, except as a means

to an end; and even in the days when he was comparatively wealthy, and keeping up his fine house at Upper Clapton in bachelor style, entertaining City men with bachelor profusion, he yet passed a second existence at the West—where he was no longer Friars the merchant turning Heaven knows how much a year, but Friars of the “Junior Exclusive,” who, though “something in the City,” was, nevertheless, in the exhaustive language of his fashionable acquaintances, “a devilish pleasant fellow.”

After his reverses, though those acquaintances beheld him but rarely, he still remained a member of the “Junior Exclusive,” and occasionally dined there with any man whose good-will he desired to conciliate; so that even whilst almost foundering pecuniarily in Scott’s Yard, he had retained a firm grasp on the borders of that life which he desired to enter, and of which he believed he could at any moment make himself free, if ever the jade Fortune took it into her head to smile upon him again.

And now, when she seemed disposed to look once more with some kindness on her old favourite, was it not hard that a man like Mr. Collis (that "brute Collis," as Austin, with less civility called him) should not merely have the will, but also the power to dash so sweet a cup from his lips?

One word to Mr. Monteith, he knew, and even more swiftly than the fair bride fled away with Lochinvar would his promised wife be borne off from Austin Friars.

He had tried to keep the news of his approaching wedding quiet; for though he felt little fear of the secret oozing out, since there were but few who knew it, and those few scarcely likely to cross either him or his path, there was yet a strong element of caution in the man's character, which made him delight in doing good things for himself by stealth, and scarcely letting his left hand know all the grand fortune his right proposed carving out for him.

This secrecy now promised to stand him in good stead; for he plainly saw that his only

chance of defeating Mr. Collis was by temporising with him.

“Once married,” he considered, and his soul revived within him, “I can snap my fingers at them all. Once married, and even if the truth do ever come out, Collis must back me up. He cannot undo the fact of his sister having been my mother; and he would scarcely think it worth his while to talk much about the other side of the house, more particularly as, spite of that drawback, he gave me the education and manners of a gentleman.”

Having comforted himself with which not utterly illogical conclusion, Mr. Friars proceeded to dress with his usual careful solicitude for the welfare of his own appearance. After he had dressed, he considered that, as it was only an evening party at the Monteiths', he might as well look in at his club before proceeding thither; and accordingly, while Mary was watching the arrivals, hoping each moment to see him enter, he drove round to the “Exclusive,” chatted to one or two

of his acquaintances, and refreshed himself with something much stronger than Mr. Collis' claret.

As usual, the stimulant did its work, and he was about leaving his club much more confident of ultimate success than had been the case an hour before, when a letter was put into his hands, written by the very last person from whom Austin expected at that juncture to hear.

"If you are not engaged, I should like to see you for ten minutes—to-night, if possible."

So the epistle ran. It had no formal commencement, it had no signature; but right well the man knew from whom it came, and his heart, as he read, gave first a great bound of hope, and then sank oppressed by an unspeakable dread.

What could she want with him—she who had flung him and his proffered love aside as things too base for her ever to think of in the future? What could she want, ay, and in such hot haste too? Did she know? was she going to turn against him? was he not merely to lose her, but

also all the fortune of which he had made so certain?

To a request from any other person he would that night, most probably, have turned a deaf ear; but such a note from Yorke was not to be lightly regarded or cavalierly treated. He knew the woman—who better?—knew she would not for any small matter have sent him such a note—knew it was for no possible advantage to herself, present or to come, that she desired to see him; and for all these reasons he turned back into his club, and wrote thus to Mary Monteith:

“DEAREST,—I have this moment received a note from my sister-in-law, asking me particularly to see her to-night. As I know she would not have sent at this hour excepting for some matter of importance, I think it better to run down to the City. If possible, however, I will be with you before ten o’clock. I have only just returned from Denmark Hill.—Ever, darling, your devoted

AUSTIN.”

He felt writing this. To do the man justice, he experienced a qualm about it, though it was a qualm simply affecting himself. The letters came in too close a juxtaposition for the dead past not to rise before him like a living presence, and as he signed "your devoted Austin," something of personal pity touched his heart. What if the face memory gave back to him at that instant were sad and tear-stained, it was yet in its sorrow, in its tenderness, in its remorse, more lovely to him than the countenance of woman might ever seem again.

Amongst his treasures, amongst those odds and ends of rubbish which all people preserve for no other conceivable purpose, as it seems, than occasionally to raise old ghosts that had better far be laid with book and bell and candle, Austin knew there was a certain packet of letters beginning with words warmer than "Dearest," and signed, many of them, "Yours till death, Yorke."

As he traced the words "your devoted," he thought of those letters the like of which he could

never hope to receive more—letters written by a woman who, feeling their mutual love hopeless, had not been reticent about her share of it—letters written when they had agreed to part—letters written when it was too late to separate—letters written when for his sake she was cheerfully bearing her portion of their common suffering and their common poverty—letters written when she was in very deed and in very truth his till death.

And now—ah, well-a-day!—death could never have parted them more utterly than a few words from Austin had done. Behold, the mystic chain was severed, their sweet love dead and faded, like the summer roses in December, or the last year's buds in May. For others there might be a summer coming, fragrant with more beauteous flowers—for others the hawthorn might put forth its blossoms, and the eglantine trail its branches over hedgerow and bank; but for them these things could come again no more for ever. Ice and snow lay on the ground; the trees were bare, the

parterres scentless; and no spring the Lord might send on the earth from that day forth could restore to life the flowers which the frost had killed.

We want so much in this world, friends—we want all store of good things in the future, and we desire to retain all we possess in the present. We ask for love and wealth, for fame, for social consideration, for the dear home-ties in a breath, though we know that we cannot have every wish of our heart gratified here; that if our life were thus filled to overflowing, some other must be left bare of blessing, of hope, and of compensation.

If, however, Austin Friars had ever learned this last truth, he never grasped the meaning of it. Walking along the pavements smoking—for he had, spite of his note to Miss Monteith, given up all idea of appearing at her party—he only thought Fate hard because, while it gave him wealth and a young pretty bride, it denied him wealth and Yorke.

There is constancy in man you perceive, my fair reader, though it often takes a wrong and inconvenient form ; and there was constancy even in this poor, weak, selfish Austin, who had done so evil a thing for himself as to cast aside the only woman he was ever likely to love through all the years to come.

Walking along—and smoking, as I have said—Mr. Friars considered whether it might not have been better for him in the days gone by had he married Yorke. The idea was by no means a new one to him, and it had occurred to his imagination thus :

“The man” (Forde) “loved her ; he is tied to her. He is a man of wealth, family, and so forth, and could not by any possibility make the matter up again. On the other hand, it is within the bounds of possibility he may wish to be free to marry some one else. Given first, therefore, that he love her, and would desire to make her happy ; secondly, that he himself desire to be free—and the result is a divorce.”

A divorce, however, as a rule, involves costs and damages; and Mr. Friars' soul had always retired appalled at the thought of these contingencies. Certainly, there were insane intervals when Austin imagined, not merely that Mr. Forde might divorce his wife, but that he would find him (Austin Friars, of the firm of Friars and Co.) capital to make the ex-Mrs. Forde happy and prosperous. But as dreams fade away before the morning light, so these absurd fancies fled at the approach of reason; and as they fled, Austin beheld not the lover sorry for the fright and sorrow and shame of his wife, who should have been, but the avenging husband visiting upon a man the sins he could not punish in a woman—flaying, so to speak, the male back, spite of the poor soft white arms that were so impotent to shield from pain or from trouble when the evil days came.

And yet, notwithstanding all this, Austin, walking Cityward, wished he had done it—wished he had been manly enough to give Mr. Forde a

chance of emancipation—wished he had feared neither counsel nor jury—wished he had made it possible for Yorke to stand with him openly, shoulder to shoulder, in the battle of life.

“We should have won it,” he thought; and remembering all her bravery, all her strength, all her loving tenderness, the man’s soul melted within him, and he murmured half aloud—

“My poor darling! can I ever forget—”

Could he? Ah! the man were not human had that proved possible.

A room—it all came back to him as he walked along the pavements—a room where life and death had fought and wrestled for the mastery—a room from whence a soul had well-nigh departed, into which a fresh soul had been born—a room where the lights were shaded, where he had to stoop to catch the words which came feebly over her white lips:

“O Austin, what would I not give to be your wife?”

“And God knows I would give everything I

have, and everything I ever hope to have, if I could make you so."

Ay, and God did know those words were true then; for even Austin, remembering, could not deny they came from the very labour of his soul. But what would you? Time passes, and the feelings of the time pass away too. Some women, like some men, cannot time the hour of their death judiciously. Had she done so, what a memory this woman might have left behind! What a mixture of remorse and pity, and love and wonderment, that one so pure could ever have become so stained—that one for whom life seemed calculated to hold so much should ever have made such a shipwreck of existence! Ah, well! in the next world no doubt this little mystery of wasted lives—of lives wasted because lived too fully and too rapidly—will be made quite clear; though nowadays it puzzles one to know why that Virtue which does nothing—not even make itself agreeable—should be, as is generally supposed, so much more pleasing in the sight of Heaven than

Frailty standing in the corner with clasped hands and downcast eyes, crying humbly, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

It mattered little, however, now to Austin what she, this woman whom he loved, had been, for they were parted, though even yet he could scarcely realise the fact, though he speculated as he walked on the possibility that her husband might have died, that she might be free—ay, and perhaps wealthy. More unlikely things had happened before; even within his knowledge of her, that thousand pounds, of which previous mention has been made, came an unexpected windfall. And supposing this were so, could the recent breach not be closed, and Yorke persuaded—Bah! he flung away his cigar with an impatient ejaculation as he awoke from his dream and faced reality. She was gone from him—gone as utterly as though the grass was growing over her grave, and in place of Yorke there would sit at his hearth, and greet him in the days to come, one fair and young and sweet indeed, but towards

whom he could never feel a tithe of that love which had made poverty itself almost bearable, and work not entirely unendurable, to the man who hated both.

He had been but rarely at the office since that night when he informed Yorke of his approaching marriage, and the pair had never met during the interval. It was, therefore, only natural that, knowing he was to look her in the face again, the man to whom she was dearer than anything on earth save himself should pause for an instant on the threshold, and that, as he ascended the staircase, he should look up for a moment, almost expecting to behold the dear face bending to catch the first sight of his, the white hands stretched out in welcome with that gesture he remembered so well.

But these things were gone and past—gone like the Yorke he had known, and whose place was now occupied by one outwardly resembling her indeed, after the fashion in which a statue may resemble a woman, but cold as the hand she gave

him, as the words with which she greeted her visitor.

“ I am sorry to have given you so much trouble,” she began, when he interrupted reproachfully—

“ Trouble to see you, Yorke ?”

“ It is very kind of you to put it in that way,” she calmly replied, “ since I know it must have been an inconvenience for you to come here at so late an hour.”

“ I would come from the ends of the earth, and at any moment of the day or night, to see you, Yorke,” he said fiercely ; “ and you know it, you who have cast me off.”

“ We will not reopen that question, if you please,” she decided. “ We said all which ever need or ever ought to be said on such a subject the other evening, and I for one, decline to discuss it further. Will you not sit down ? though it seems rather absurd to offer that civility to a man who is in his own house.”

“ It is yours as much as mine, Yorke,” he

answered, "though I am sorry to say it will not be mine much longer."

"Why are you sorry?"

"Because it will make a difference to you."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Quite; the landlord's agent writes me word that he has let the house to a tenant his principal agrees to accept, and that my responsibility will therefore cease almost immediately. Of course this is what I wished in one way—but O, Yorke—"

"You need not fret yourself on my account," she said. "Believe me, I am quite capable of attending to my own comforts and interests."

"Will you tell me what you mean to do?"

"Certainly not; our way does not now lie together, and there can therefore be no necessity for either to tell the other whither we purpose travelling."

"I would tell you anything on earth, Yorke," he declared.

"Would you?" she retorted; "then a singular

change has been wrought within the last week in your ideas. I am not blaming you for your secrecy, remember," she went on; "but still I cannot quite forget the years we lived together, as I imagined in perfect confidence, with scarcely a thought kept back, while all the time—"

"Well—go on," he exclaimed; "while all the time—"

"You had a secret you were keeping from me, a sorrow you denied my sharing."

It was not the way in which he had expected her to put the matter, and her womanly consideration softened him.

"And if there were a secret and a sorrow, Yorke," he said, "why should I have burdened you with either?"

"Because it would have been better for you," she replied. "Ah, Austin, you might have trusted me."

He rose impatiently from his seat, and crossing his arms on the mantelpiece, rested his head upon them. There had been a time when he could not

have remained thus for a moment without a caressing hand resting on his shoulder, an entreating voice sounding in his ear and praying him to be comforted, yet now Yorke sat still and looked at him—not hardly, it is true, but with a sad pity in her sweet eyes. Think of that pair, reader—think of them in that old room where they had been happy and sorry together, but never separate before—divided now for ever—think of all the memories which crowded upon each during that minute’s silence—think of the man still smarting under the recollection of his interview with Mr. Collis, standing there and feeling she could, witnessing his anguish, still sit quiet—think of the woman who had been near to him as a wife, and dearer than many wives we wot of, gazing upon him, while a sharp and cruel pain seemed tearing her heart to pieces.

She was more a widow at that moment than one who looks upon her husband lying in his coffin; for the latter beholds only what has been living dead, while Yorke failed to see anything

save what had lived solely in her own imagination. The man who stood there in his crushed pride, with bowed head and humiliated spirit, was not the man to whom she had given herself in the days departed. To a myth, to a shadow, to a dream, she had sacrificed herself, and her hopes, and her position; and yet it was not of all this the woman thought, as she gazed upon him, but rather of the anguish she knew he was experiencing.

“How long have you been aware of this?” he asked at length.

“What can it signify,” she replied, “whether I heard it yesterday or a year since? I know you are about committing a second deception, and I sent for you to-night to pray you not to do it.”

“You only knew to-night, then, or to-day?” he suggested.

“As I said before, it cannot matter to you when or where I heard the fact; but it may matter much to you if Miss Monteith hear it too.”

“Do you intend to tell her?” he inquired.

“No ; but I think you should,” she answered.

“And supposing I assure you there is no earthly necessity for me to do anything of the kind—”

“Of course I should accept your word without question, and—retain my own opinion.”

He looked at her as she made this pleasant reply, and said,

“There is no deceiving you, Yorke.”

“I used to have an idea of the same kind,” she answered ; “but I find I was mistaken.”

“I never deceived you,” he began, but she interrupted him hurriedly.

“For mercy’s sake,” she entreated, “let our dead past lie ; it is none so lovely by this time that we should rake up the old bones, in order to look upon the skeleton of what was once—once—not utterly ghastly—”

“Yorke—” that momentary breakdown gave him an advantage over her, and he was not slow to seize it—“Yorke, let bygones be bygones, and we can make a future for ourselves more beautiful than any past we have either of us experienced.”

Then in a moment Yorke had snatched her hand from him, and stood erect.

“No, we cannot,” she retorted; “nor can you—nor can anyone make my future beautiful, or my past, as I look at it now, other than unlovely. You cannot give me back the man I loved—the man I believed in—the man at whose bidding I would have gone through fire and water to serve or please. The man I loved was not you, Austin Friars; and you can no more restore him to me than you can restore myself to me, or bring back the years which have been as totally destroyed in my life as though the locust had eaten and the canker-worm destroyed them.”

“Then it is all gone and past,” he said sadly.

“It is all gone. Whether it be all past, is quite another question,” she answered, “seeing that even when a man is in his grave his past cannot be considered quite surely buried and forgotten. It is all buried, however, so far as we are concerned.”

“How easily you can forget!” he murmured.

"It was not I who forgot first," she retorted; "but, as I said before, there must be an end of this. What I wanted to speak to you about to-night was, first, yourself; and secondly, Miss Monteith. You must not let her marry you in ignorance; you should tell her father who and what you are."

"And what do you suppose I am?" he asked.

"Not one of the Hertfordshire Friars, at all events," she replied.

"But, to speak more plainly—" he suggested.

"Nay, Austin, there can be no necessity for me to do so. You know very well what I mean, and you must be aware it would never do for you to run the risk of such a secret reaching Mr. Monteith's ears after you are married."

"If Mr. Monteith suspect nothing about *you*, I care very little, when once I am his son-in-law, what he may hear concerning *me*."

"But the deception," she pleaded.

"Where is the deception? Like the girl, he takes me for what I am; like the girl, he takes

me because he is somewhat sentimental, and in his domestic relations utterly unworldly. His dead son was fond of me, in the days when I first knew you; and so, for the sake of that dead son, and because he believes I have it in me to conquer fortune again, he does not object to give me his daughter. He agrees, not because he imagines me to be the descendant of a line of kings, but because he is attached to his daughter, and his daughter is attached to me, and he wants to keep her with him, and he desires to have some one to succeed him in his business. There is the position, Yorke, the exact position of affairs."

"But supposing," said Yorke, "you were once married, and that some one went to Mr. Monteith and told him, 'Your son-in-law is not exactly what you think; he has kept something back; he has not been straightforward with you,' you might lose his confidence and his daughter's affection. Your position might become uncomfortable; your prospects uncertain. Every hour in the day they might make you feel that if you

had not been open with them, they would not be confidential with you. Believe me, Austin," she exclaimed earnestly, "truth is always the best. Go to Mr. Monteith and tell him everything, and then, whatever happen, you will feel you have acted honourably and honestly, and that no one can hereafter cast a stone at you."

"Not even about you, Yorke?"

"Not even about me," she repeated. "I have always known, in a vague sort of way, that a relation like ours could not continue for ever; and if I hold back my hand, who should dare injure you? Had I to speak—ever—in the future of our past, which God forbid, I should not talk of the last few days, but of the years in which you were more than husband to me, and I more than wife to you. I should talk of the love and the care and the tenderness—of nothing else, you may be quite sure."

"O Yorke; I wish—"

"Yes, Austin," she interrupted, "I know you do; and I also know there is no use in wishing

now; and it is because I am afraid there may come a day after you are married when you will wish to as little purpose once again, that I advise you to go to Mr. Monteith and tell him everything. Will you—for my sake, will you?”

“For your sake! Yes, if you will promise to be to me—as you yourself said a moment since—more than wife—I will go and tell him all, though that all is not exactly what you suppose.”

“It can never be,” she answered. “After what has passed between us, do you suppose we could take up the ghost of our love and play at make-believe with it like children? It can never be. Had it been otherwise I could not have asked you to come here to-night. I could not have advised you as I have done.”

“If that be so, then,” he replied, “I shall not follow your advice. I went into this matter with my eyes open. I saw just what such a match might do for me—for you. I never had a thought of disassociating our interests—”

“Please leave me out of the matter,” she in-

terrputed. "I would rather feel I have been deserted than insulted."

"I did not mean to insult you," he proceeded doggedly. "I am only stating facts. I saw the match would be a desirable one. I knew my own position was desperate. I imagined such a marriage would give us—"

"You," she corrected.

"Us," he repeated, "ease of mind—relief from humiliation. If I could have got such help without marriage, I should have preferred it; but—"

"The wife being a necessary encumbrance, you kindly agreed to take her," Yorke finished.

"The wife being young, pretty, and passably accomplished, I agreed to take her, as I should have agreed all the same had she been old, ugly, and ignorant."

"And, to go back to what I said before, suppose these people ever discover that you have not been quite frank with them?"

"Sufficient for the day," he answered; "and besides, once married, I can snap my fingers" (he

was repeating the words he had rehearsed to himself driving back from Denmark Hill) "at busybodies. You may be quite sure I shall not be such a fool as to neglect placing myself as soon as possible beyond the power of any parent's whims."

"To do you justice," she said, "I never doubted that, according to your light, you would strive to make yourself independent of the Monteiths. It was only your light I doubted."

"You never did believe in me," he said somewhat irritably.

"Nay, Austin, I believed only too fully," she answered; then hastily proceeded, "But this is no matter of sentiment, it is a question of worldly expediency; and in worldly matters my vision was always keener and clearer than yours. Take my advice, therefore—it is about the last piece of advice I am ever likely to offer you—and be frank with these people."

"I cannot be frank with them now," he persisted; "and if I could, I would not. Besides,

what is there to tell? My mother was a sister of Mr. Collis; on my father's side I am one of the Hertfordshire Friars; there, what more would you have?"

"I would have you speak the truth to me, Austin," she retorted, "if you never mean to speak it to any one again. I do not want to know the particulars of your birth, but there is no use in your trying to delude me with any nonsense about it now. It is natural, I know, that you should shrink from undeceiving Miss Monteith, but why you feel it necessary to try to blind me passes my understanding. Spite of all things, my last words to you are—tell Mr. Monteith the truth at any cost, no matter what the result may prove."

"You appear to think I am wonderfully enamoured of pauperism," he answered. "I have wealth, position, ease of mind, some rest of body, within my grasp, and you coolly bid me jeopardise all these good things, for the possession of which I have already sacrificed so much, by opening my

mouth when no earthly harm can come to any one by my keeping it closed."

"You think the game so well worth having, and feel so sure of winning it," she said, "that you do not mind risking the possible candle."

"You have expressed my exact meaning, epigrammatically, as usual," he replied.

For a moment they looked at each other in silence—she leaning slightly back in her chair, with hands clasped loosely together in her lap; he leaning against the chimneypiece, regarding her with an expression which was half-bitter, half-tender.

He hated her manner of taking it; he hated the way she put it; but he loved her, and he felt if she would only unclasp those dear fingers and hold a hand towards him he could have flung himself on his knees before her, and told her all his sorrow, his suffering, his disappointment, his fear.

Perhaps she guessed what was passing through his mind, for, before he could speak again, she began:

"There, I have done ; I have said all and more than I meant to say in this matter—only I would to God I had either known less, or been able to influence you more, even for the girl's sake."

"It would break her heart to have anything come between us now," he retorted, with a savage pleasure at the pain he knew he was giving.

"Poor heart!" Yorke said softly ; and the man was silenced.

"She wishes to see you very much," he began, after a pause.

"She cannot expect to have every wish gratified," was the reply.

"I thought that perhaps you might not object to call," he remarked. "Believing, as they do, that you are my sister-in-law, both father and daughter are pained and hurt by your persistent refusal of their invitations."

"You should have protected me from those invitations," she said.

"But, Yorke, what could I do? Mr. Monteith has seen you here over and over again ; he has

asked me a hundred questions about you ; Mary wants to know you—why cannot you accept the position, and make the best of a bad business by putting a good face upon it ?”

“Because I am not so clever a hypocrite as you, Austin,” she answered ; “because I mean our parting to be final ; because, when once we have spoken about the few business matters that must be arranged immediately, you shall be to me as one dead, or gone away to a far country. I have written to Miss Monteith that I do not and that I will not visit ; that I wish her all happiness ; and that, were it not for very sorrowful circumstances in my life which have rendered all society distasteful, I would gladly make her acquaintance. I have done all I can do—I have done all I will do.”

“They are not content about the matter, however,” he replied. “They want to have you there ; Mr. Monteith is specially grieved at your decision.”

“That is a pity,” she said. “I suppose I am to those people what the vineyard of Naboth the

Jezreelite was to Ahab. They have everything the heart of man can desire—they have wealth and health and position—and—you ; and lo ! they are not content ; they want me. They desire that Mordecai should do homage to them ; and while I refuse to go to Manchester Square, their cup scarcely seems full enough or sweet enough. You should have shielded me from this, at all events, Austin.”

“I could not shield you from it so long as they knew of your existence,” he answered.

“Let it pass, then,” she agreed, “only clearly understand my intentions. You are nothing to me now ; and as these people are less than nothing, I will never cross the threshold of their home.”

“You will think better of it,” he suggested.

“If I thought differently, I should think worse,” was the reply ; “but now, as we have talked fully over your affairs, I should like to speak about my own. Of course you are aware I cannot live on air, healthy as the City is reported to be ; and

though I do not desire to trouble you about money-matters, still I may just mention that I want you to repay me that legacy of Mrs. Clissold's."

"I wish you would let me provide for you," he said.

"I would rather provide for myself," she answered; "and with that money I believe I can manage to do so. At all events, I mean to try. Mr. Fulke and I have talked the matter over, and he considers there ought to be some arrangement made before you are actually either Mr. Monteith's partner or son-in-law."

"Did you consider it necessary, then, Yorke, to consult a lawyer on this subject?" he inquired.

"I thought it necessary," was the reply, "to explain my exact position to Mr. Fulke and ask his advice, and it would have been pleasanter for me had he taken the whole management of my affairs; but I could not bear you to feel he was acting as a lawyer between us, for which reason I have chosen to speak to you myself. Of course I do not want to trouble you about the money,

but I desire a settlement ; and Mr. Fulke thought that perhaps bills—”

“For Heaven’s sake, Yorke, do not go on! I cannot endure these business details between you and me. Of course you shall have your money.”

“I hope I shall,” she said quietly, “for it would be a very disastrous thing to me if I had not. However, as you remark, these business details are not agreeable between man and woman when once a man and woman come to have separate interests. Do, pray, see Mr. Fulke, and arrange with him—will you?”

“Yes,” Austin promised.

And Yorke added no more, though she felt satisfied from his tone he had not the slightest intention of performing.

For a moment there ensued a silence, during the course of which Yorke expected him to make some movement to go ; but he still leant against the chimneypiece looking moodily across the room—looking at the books ranged on their shelves, at the files hanging against the wall, at the papers

littering his writing-table, at the lamp by the light of which he had cast-up many and many a weary column of figures in the days when hope was strong within him, and it still seemed competent to the man to make a bright future by means of hard labour in the present.

He thought about himself, and then about Yorke; and after he had thought for awhile, he began:

“I wish you would tell me your plans. What are you going to do? Where do you mean to live?”

“I will not tell you what I am going to do, or where I mean to live,” she replied. “As for my plans, I can only assure you of this much, that if I had not formed them in haste and in anger, I do not think they are such as I should ever have adopted. I only think this, however, and mention it merely so that, if hereafter you imagine I have been deceitful and double-faced towards you, there may occur to you in the same moment my present justification.”

He pondered over this answer for a minute, then said :

“May I ask you one question—do you intend to marry?”

“Marry! I—marry! Austin, are you mad?”

“No; I repeat my inquiry.”

“Certainly not; if even I wished to marry, how could I do so?”

“Many a woman would risk it, under the circumstances,” he muttered: then added aloud, “But you have been asked to marry?”

“That is not a question you have a right to ask,” she said; “as it is assuredly one that I have no right to answer.”

“You have answered it,” Austin declared; and he turned towards the fire with something between a smile and a sneer playing about his lips.

“Now, how could he have known anything concerning that?” thought Yorke; but she was a wise woman, and held her peace, fortunately.

“I must be going,” said the man at length, rousing himself from a long fit of musing. “I

must be going, though Heaven knows I wish I had never to go. You have not offered me food or drink—not even bread and water, Yorke—since I came into the house, in token of friendship. Are you aware of the omission?”

“Yes,” she answered; “it is best so, believe me.”

“But we are friends?”

“I trust we shall never be other than good friends; but I trust also that after to-night we shall be good friends at a distance.”

“I cannot win a word from you, Yorke!”

“Never again!”

And as he looked at her, standing pale and resolute in the subdued light of the shaded lamp, he knew what she said was true.

She had risen at once when he first spoke of leaving; and now, lifting a small parcel from the table, she offered it to him.

“Your letters,” she shortly explained; “at your convenience will you send me mine?”

“Do you require them, Yorke?” he asked.

"No," she answered; "but they had better be destroyed. It would scarcely please your wife to read some of them if they ever fell in her way hereafter."

"I did not think it was in you to take this parting as you have done," he remarked bitterly.

"Ah! we never know what is in us till we are tried," she replied.

He took her hand and held it for a moment, while he looked steadfastly in her face, seeking for some token of relenting; but he might as well have looked into the eyes of a picture as at those which had once beamed back on him such glances of tenderness and love.

"Good-bye, Yorke!" he said at length.

"Good-bye, Austin; God bless you!"

"And you!" he answered, a little huskily; then the door closed, and Austin Friars was gone.

She stood where he had left her till she heard the hall-door slam, and his tread echoing down the Yard; then she walked across the room, and, leaning her head against the cold marble, re-

mained looking into the fire, reading, perhaps, a story there.

Meantime Austin stopped under the archway, in order to light his cigar: when he had coaxed a match to ignite, and puffed his havannah into a red glow, he turned into Bush Lane, muttering almost audibly:

“I wonder what the deuce it is she intends doing!”

CHAPTER IX.

IN MANCHESTER SQUARE.

WHILE Yorke, with dry aching eyes, stood looking into the fire, reading therein that possible story of which mention has been made; and Austin Friars was walking slowly up Cannon Street towards St. Paul's, revolving in his mind that to him puzzling question relative to Yorke's plans and intentions,—Mary Monteith sat in the drawing-room of her father's house in Manchester Square, hoping, almost against hope, that Mr. Friars would, spite of his note and the lateness of the hour, still put in an appearance.

The guests were gone, the last ice had been handed, and the last glass of sherry swallowed, full half an hour before. It had not been a

pleasant party to any one, and no person felt particularly loth to leave, unless, indeed, it might be that inevitable man and woman who, never having a word to say to any one, and never doing the least thing towards making an evening pass agreeably, are always the first to come, and the last, for some inscrutable reason, to go.

Even Mr. Monteith, standing on the hearthrug with his back to the fire, expressed his gratification at the affair being over ; whilst Miss Ophelia Monteith, a Scotch cousin of certain age and very decided opinions, declared she thought such gatherings unsatisfactory in the extreme, and not to be compared with the social delights of having a few friends "dropping in."

"From which, good Lord, deliver us !" exclaimed Mr. Monteith piteously ; for the worthy merchant's heart was young, though his hairs were grey, and he had not the slightest desire to fall into that state of "old-fogeyism" which believes only in a few staid friends, '20 port, whist, and a hot nightcap.

"Mary dear," said Miss Ophelia, routed at this point, "had you not better go to bed?"

"I am not tired," Mary answered; and her eyes wandered towards the door.

"It is of no use your expecting Mr. Friars to-night," the spinster affirmed.

"Now what *can* you know about it?" asked Mr. Monteith; "it is just as likely as not that he will come."

"But he wrote that he was going into the City."

"Well, the City is not so far off as Jericho," remarked Mr. Monteith snappishly—so snappishly, indeed, that Mary lifted her long lashes, and looked at him with her large blue childish eyes in mute amazement.

"It is my belief," said Miss Ophelia, "that you are as much in love with Mr. Friars as Mary."

"I hope not," answered the merchant, "or it would seriously interfere with my business. Why, Mary has not done a single thing since she was engaged except listen for his knock."

“O fie, papa!” Mary exclaimed; and she went over and kissed him, rubbing her soft fair face against his, as a kitten might have done; after which her father, putting his hands on her shoulders, held her at arm’s-length from him, and said :

“He ought to come to-night, my darling, if only to see how pretty you look.”

“She will not keep pretty long if she keep such late hours,” remarked Miss Monteith.

“Did you keep early hours, Ophelia?” asked her cousin; which impertinent remark the lady affected not to hear; while Mary, always anxious to avert unpleasantness, hurried on with—

“Papa, I do so want to see Austin’s sister-in-law. I quite love her letter to me. Might I not go and talk to her—all by myself, you understand, without anyone else? I think if she knew me she would come here,” and the small fingers twisted themselves in and out of his watch-chain, and the kitten-like caresses were resumed.

"I never heard of such a thing," objected Miss Monteith.

"I have talked to Ophelia about it," proceeded the girl, "but she said it was a ridiculous idea. I do not think it ridiculous. If Mrs. Friars have had so much trouble, and be very poor, it is all the more reason why some one should try to comfort her. Austin is so fond of her—and you—you like her very much, do you not, papa?"

For a moment Mr. Monteith remained silent, then he said :

"You shall go and call on her to-morrow, if you like, and you are a dear good girl."

"Had you not better ask Mr. Friars about it first?" suggested Miss Monteith. "My opinion is, he neither wants you to go there, nor his sister-in-law to come here. I may be wrong, of course—"

"Though, equally as a matter of course, that is scarcely likely, you would add," finished Mr. Monteith sharply; then turning to his daughter, he said :

“Of course you had better mention your intention to him. Ah! here he comes.”

And at that moment, surely enough, Mr. Friars appeared, apologising for intruding at so late an hour, but he “saw lights in the window,”—apologising for his absence, “but Yorke had so much to say and tell him.”

“We were just talking about her and you,” Mr. Monteith remarked. “This little girl wants to go and see her. Would Mrs. Friars object?”

“As she has told you herself, she does not visit,” Austin answered, with a smile and a shrug.

“Well, settle it between you, then,” Mr. Monteith said kindly; “but remember, I only give you five minutes for the discussion.—Come, Ophelia; these young people want to talk politics, and can do so quite as well without us. They will not find the topic so interesting ten years hence.”

And with this moral reflection Mr. Monteith left the room, preceded by Miss Ophelia, who did not approve of Mary’s lover, and approved less of

“the perfect idiot the girl made of herself about him.”

Even with her head resting on his shoulders, and his arms clasped about her, Mary did not on this occasion immediately proceed to make an idiot of herself; for her mind was full of Yorke, and she said accordingly, “I may go, Austin, may I not?”

“Certainly, little one. If Mr. Monteith do not object, why should I?”

“O, papa would like me to go, I think.”

“Then I should go, more particularly if you at all desire a stepmother.”

CHAPTER X.

YORKE'S VISITORS.

"DESIRE a stepmother!" In utter amazement Miss Monteith lifted her eyes to Austin's face as she repeated the last words of his sentence. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I say," Mr. Friars replied. "I believe your father admires my sister-in-law immensely, and that, were she so inclined, she might become Mrs. Monteith within a month. You must keep this to yourself, though, little one; it will not do for you to rush off to Miss Ophelia and tell her my suspicions."

"I shall tell no one," Mary answered quietly; and then she sat for a minute silent and thoughtful—so silent and so thoughtful, that at length

Austin, putting his hand under her chin, turned the sweet face towards himself while he asked, "Where is my darling off to, now?"

"I was gone on a journey, Austin," she said, "though not on one very far from home. I was thinking about papa and Mrs. Friars. If she be so very good and sweet—and she must be, since you love her—I should not dislike having her for a stepmother. When we are away, papa will be lonely—all alone with Ophelia. She may look after the house very well, but she would never make it seem like home to him; and I am not sure that it might not be happier if things could all fall out just as you say."

"But they cannot," Austin answered, with a fierce exultation, as the words Yorke had spoken that night came back to his mind with almost a stronger meaning than they had borne on hearing. "She will never marry again; she has loved once, and she is not a woman to love again, or to marry without love."

"Then why did you say, if I desired a step-mother?" Mary inquired.

"Because I was a simpleton," he replied; "however, I was talking folly, and speaking rather of what I once thought than of what I now know."

"What do you know?" the girl persisted.

"That Mr. Monteith has asked Yorke to marry him, and that she—declined."

"Did she tell you so?" was Mary's next question.

"I made her tell me," he answered.

"Poor papa!"

Each man and each woman for his and her own, you perceive, my reader; and each man and each woman for him and herself.

There is a drawback to most visions of perfect happiness, and Mary's drawback had always been the idea of leaving her father to the tender mercies of Miss Ophelia; she might perhaps some day marry him, spite of anything she and Austin could do to stop the sacrifice. Further, it is never

agreeable to our vanity to know that one of our own kith and kin has been repulsed ; that "no" has been said by a stranger to one of our own blood. We may be glad the match is destined never to come off, but we feel keenly that the offer ought never to have been made. Even if we dislike those of our blood, we yet feel, when through them a blow dealt by an outsider touches us, that the subtle bond of relationship cannot be broken by any volition on our part, and that the grief and mortification of our people touches ourselves, though their success and rejoicing may fail to waken even an answering echo of pride in our breasts.

All of which Mary Monteith felt vaguely (she was young, and not given to psychological reflections) as she sat, after saying "Poor papa!" with the clasp of her fingers on Austin's hand loosened a little.

Yorke had taught him in the years a good deal of the obscure science of sentiment, as it affects women's minds and manners ; and he conse-

quently understood that the loosening clasp meant this:

“A woman belonging to your family has vexed my father, and I am hurt through him.”

Mary did not put this into words—could not have done so—but Austin, instructed as has been said, comprehended the unspoken sentence, and answered it accordingly.

“My pet,” he said, drawing her nearer, and stroking her hair as though she were a dove, and he trying to smooth her ruffled feathers—“my pet, Yorke was right. I know it, though this was all which passed between us on the subject. I said, ‘You have been asked to marry?’ and she replied, ‘That is not a question you have a right to ask, and it is assuredly one I have no right to answer.’ Then I remarked, ‘You have answered it.’ So do not be angry with Yorke, and think she betrayed faith. She is incapable of doing anything dishonourable.”

“And yet, Austin, you have never wished me to know her,” the girl said reproachfully.

“Because, my darling, it is her own desire to live quietly and out of the world; because her life has not been a happy one; and voluntarily she stands out of life’s sunshine. Had she married your father,” Austin went on hurriedly, “it could not have proved well for either. He would have felt the difference in age. The admiration she must have received is not the sort of thing likely to make a home happy. The old love would have lain between them—the old love she never can forget—for ever.”

“O, Austin, how you talk of her!” Mary said with a swift and sudden alarm. “If you knew her before your brother married her, were you—were you never in love with her yourself?”

It was the skeleton of her engaged life clothed with flesh and blood, and presented for his consideration at last. But Austin was equal to the occasion.

“Has that idea been worrying you, sweet?” he said. “Are you jealous of my dear Yorke? You had better go and see her, love, and you will

then find out in five minutes just how I like her and she likes me. I never loved any one in my life, Mary, as I love you ; though Yorke has been friend, sister, comrade—shall I say ?—all in one ; and though I have pitied her — as — no one, darling, shall ever need to pity you.”

“Has she been so unhappy ?”

“Yes, but she is strong to bear unhappiness.”

“Was her married life—” Mary began, but Austin stopped her in a fashion approved by lovers.

“You must not cross-question me, darling. Whatever you want to know, ask her ; and if she see fit to answer you, well ; if not, you will understand with that prior comprehension, with that sort of prescience that seems to belong to the youngest of your sex, there are things of which no woman cares to speak, even to her nearest and dearest friend.”

“I wish she would let me be her friend,” said the poor loving little soul, that always seemed stretching its tendrils forth to meet with anything whereto it might cling.

“See and ask her,” Austin advised. “Yorke is neither cold nor ungrateful. Only, when you have seen her, do not love her more than you do me.”

Which warning Mary answered by putting her arms round his neck, and telling him everything which it was just then of great importance to Austin Friars to hear. Nothing in fact, save the importance of her affection, could have reconciled him to bear it; for all this love-making, as he confessed to his own heart over and over again, was the very hardest work he had ever gone through in his life.

After a man has once experienced a grand passion—after he has felt what it is to love *the* woman—all other courtship, excepting it may be courtship which just passes the time, grows irksome, flat, stale, and unprofitable. It is like a play to which we take an uncongenial and pre-occupied mind. Others may enjoy the wit, the pathos, the broad fun, the execrable puns, the tedious drawn-out dialogue; but we, to whom the

thing is neither fresh nor fair, who are thinking of different actors, of other hopes, of a former audience, among which appeared forms we remember only too well, draw back behind the curtain and yawn decorously, whilst the young people, whose lives hold as yet no tragedies, lean eagerly over the front of the box and drink in the story, every line of which is new, every turn in which is to them full of a strange and non-communicable delight.

I have often fancied that to an actor who, after having gone through the most passionate scenes of an opera with one of the queens of song—one of those women who were and who are not—has to perform his part in company with a feeble copy of the former *prima donna*, the whole business must seem just what his second venture does to the man who essays the trial as to whether it be possible for him to make love twice with the same *verve*; to recall at will the olden feelings; to experiment as to whether this melody, which once filled all his being would sound the

same sung by a strange minstrel in an unfamiliar room.

Ah, friends, there are few of you, come to years of discretion, who cannot, out of the fulness of your own experience, grasp something of that sorrow of our being at which I have hinted—who cannot comprehend how it was that though Mary Monteith was young and fair and sweet, there were yet times when Austin Friars—without remorse or sentiment or imagination—turned away sick at heart—sick for very sorrow of himself.

The future he beheld stretching away in the distance contained in no corner of it either Yorke or her equivalent; along all the road he saw no trace of the woman he loved, or of any other woman likely ever to supply her place—to be to him as water in a dry place, as wells of gladness in a barren and thirsty land.

He knew well enough that no woman—and certainly no girl—could ever supply to him the want of Yorke, whom he had voluntarily deserted, and perhaps for this very reason he was now not

wholly averse that Mary should travel Cityward; and if an acquaintance were struck between the pair, then—why, then—there would still be one link left to him of the old chain, though two hearts might never be bound together by it again—ah, never!

As for Mary, whatever her idea on the subject may have been, her imagination was stimulated and her curiosity awakened; for both of which reasons—and also perhaps because she had a notion that her woman's wit might still make everything which appeared to her crooked, straight—she started off at an unreasonably early hour on the following morning for Scott's Yard, where a servant, unacquainted with the blessings derivable from, and the necessities attached to, "not at home," ushered her straight up two pair of stairs into Yorke's sitting-room.

It was a small apartment overlooking the churchyard, and commanding a view of Turn-wheel-lane; plainly furnished, and yet filled with those nameless trifles which give a look of home,

an idea of a woman's care and presence, to the humblest abode.

By the table Yorke sat engaged at some needlework—something which involved net and lace—for Mary, remembering first impressions, always associated those white soft hands straying, as their owner talked, nervously amongst clouds of transparent material, of wandering here and there as behind a veil, of appearing and disappearing, and of all the time possessing for the visitor a strange sort of fascination.

As the girl in her fresh beauty, wrapped in furs and velvet, with her bright sweet face framed in the daintiest of bonnets—in her youth and happiness, eager, and yet with an indescribable shyness about her—appeared on the threshold, Yorke rose, and for a moment was so utterly astounded that she could say nothing excepting “Miss Monteith!” which name she repeated almost mechanically after the servant who announced her visitor.

“Yes, I am Mary Monteith,” was the answer,

spoken simply, and yet with the most becoming blush conceivable. "I hope you will not be angry, Mrs. Friars," she went on, never noticing how Yorke winced; "but I felt I must see you, and that, as you would not come to me, I must come to see you."

"It is very kind of you," Yorke said; but she never moved from where she stood, nor stretched out a hand, nor offered her visitor a chair. She stood like one bewildered, not knowing what to do with the guest forced thus upon her. She had not been prepared for this, and even Yorke's self-possession failed when she found herself face to face with youth and innocence, with inexperience and artlessness; with one who hardly knew, even by report, the meaning of the word sin; and who, after their past—after it all—was yet Austin Friars' affianced wife.

She did not know what to say to or how to greet her; she turned sick and faint as she looked into the fresh young face, which changed

a little and clouded over at the singular reception Yorke vouchsafed.

“You have meant very kindly,” the woman said, repeating her previous remark in a different form ; “but I thought—that is, I believed—Will you not be seated?” she went on hurriedly. And then when Mary in wonder took possession of the proffered chair, Yorke walked away from her towards the window and looked out over the churchyard at the leafless trees standing brown and damp and bare in the light of the winter’s day, at the wet earth and the dreary graves and the high blackened walls and the rusty iron railings, while she tried to steady her voice, and collect her senses in order to say what she had to say to her visitor.

Fifty men could not have disconcerted her so much as did that young soft pretty girlish creature seated near the fire. Had she ever been angry with Mary Monteith? Possibly ; for though mentally a strong woman, she was yet weak where her love entered ; but now all anger, all dislike,

all jealousy, died in a moment, and as she turned and met the sweet pleading eyes fastened wonderingly upon her face, there took possession of her such a feeling of pity, such a prevision of the unhappiness to come, that the current of her own existence seemed almost to turn from that hour, and instead of flowing over rocks and storms, to glide on more peacefully through better and purer channels to the great sea.

“I have to apologise for my seeming discourtesy,” Yorke began. “Your visit took me by surprise. I was not prepared for so much kindness. I have not been accustomed latterly to kindness. My life in some respects has proved unhappy, and—”

She paused, fairly lost as to how she should proceed; but Mary, taking up the unfinished sentence, relieved her.

“You do not want to let any of us make it happier for you. That is really what I came to talk to you about; for I am certain, I am confident, we could brighten your life a little. We

are strangers to you now, but we surely need not always remain strangers. It has been a great trouble to us all—to papa and me and Austin”—(the name came out a little shyly)—“to think you would not come to see me. I have heard so much of you, and—and—I quite loved your letter, and felt so grieved you would not say to me, ‘I wish you all happiness,’ instead of writing it.”

The net was closing round her, and Yorke felt it. She did not know what to do with the girl, who, thinking of her father and of Austin and of the lonely woman standing by the window, towards whom she felt herself irresistibly attracted, uttered the foregoing sentence with tears in her eyes and a little touching tremor in her voice, while all the time Yorke was thinking:

“If she only knew, if she only knew.” And then she felt she must never know, and she prayed some interruption might come to put an end to the interview and rid her of the visitor, whose face she understood would haunt her for many a day to come, whom she would still in

fancy see sitting in her youth and beauty by the hearth, where she—Yorke, whose youth was passed and beauty worn—should keep her solitary vigils in the desolate years to come.

Thinking all this, Yorke came back to the table, and, standing so that the whole width of it intervened between herself and the intruder, began :

“ Miss Monteith—”

But the girl softly suggested “ Mary.”

“ Mary, then.” And there was a touch almost of tenderness in the woman’s voice—perhaps a memory of her own far-away youth flitted before her, as she looked at the figure seated opposite. “ Mary, did Mr. Friars—did Austin never explain to you—never say—I could not visit? That, owing to past circumstances—to events which happened when you could have been but a child—I preferred to live quietly and retired? That to separate myself utterly from society was, indeed, the only course left open for me?”

“ Austin said you preferred to receive no

visitors, and that you likewise did not care to visit. He never told me anything else."

"And he was right not to speak of my secret," Yorke answered. "There is a story in every woman's life, though you are too young as yet to comprehend that fact; and there is a story in mine."

"May I not know it?" the girl asked.

"No," Yorke replied. "As things have gone so far, if you like to send your father to me, I will tell him as much as there can be any need for me to tell, or for him to hear; and when he says to you, 'Her decision was right,' you must rest satisfied—my child."

And the hardness dropped out of her voice, and there came such a softness into her face as she spoke, that Mary Monteith could bear it no longer, but, rising from her seat, flung her arms round Mrs. Friars' neck, and sobbed aloud,

"O, how I could love you, if you would only let me!"

"I hope you have some one to love you better

than I ever could," answered Yorke, whose heart at that moment held such a pain as it had not known even when she was parting with Austin Friars ; and Mary, fancying she meant him, did not know that the woman's white lips were shaping, in their repressed agony, the word " God."

As they stood thus, Mary trying to nestle near her in token of sympathy and affection, while Yorke strove to hold her off, dreading the kiss she felt it would almost kill her to receive, the door opened, and Mr. Monteith entered.

Never before—never—not excepting the days when Austin Friars was wont to be the one person she most longed to behold—for whose coming she waited with a sort of despairing impatience which might have told its tale to a wise observer—had Yorke been so rejoiced to see any one appear before her.

"O Mr. Monteith!" she almost gasped, freeing herself from the encircling arms, and holding out her hand in cordial greeting, "why did you not come sooner?"

“It was worth while delaying the pleasure of coming, to know I was wanted at all,” answered Mr. Monteith with old-fashioned gallantry; and Mary, looking on the pair, considered :

“If he have proposed, she cannot have refused.”

So swift are the sex in reading the signs of the times (alas, it is only the signs as the darlings think they affect themselves that they study!). And straightway Mary, comprehending there was a mystery, hoped—nothing would come of it, the proposal—and that Austin was mistaken.

“Mary, love,” said her father, “I hoped you would have called for me to come with you.”

“Ah, papa!” answered Mary, who, not having been accustomed to adventure much on her own account, felt keenly the failure of her admirably-laid plans; “I wanted to have it all my own way, and I wish now I had not.”

“What is it—what has happened?” Mr. Monteith said, glancing from his daughter’s flushed face and tearful eyes to Yorke, who only looked a

shade paler and more self-controlled than usual, as she replied with a grave smile.

“We have not quarrelled; but there are some circumstances connected with myself, the existence of which seem to have perplexed Miss Monteith. As an explanation now appears unavoidable, I would rather explain the nature of those circumstances to you than to your daughter.”

“I quite understand. Mary, my love, you had better go home; I will take you back to the carriage. Some other day Mrs. Friars will allow you to come and see her again, and you can then have a long talk together.”

“No, I think not,” Yorke said determinedly. She held the girl’s hand, and almost unconsciously pressed it as she spoke. “I do not believe Miss Monteith will ever come to see me again, and I should therefore prefer to bid her good-bye now.”

There could be no possibility of mistaking the meaning of these words, and both father and daughter stood for a moment silent and rebuffed.

Then, to end the interview, Yorke said in a softer tone, "Though I wish you had not come here, still I am more obliged for the feeling which prompted your visit than you can ever know. I wish you all happiness, and if it lay in my power to make you happy, you should be so. Good-bye, and thank you."

She never held out her hand again, but Mary took it, and would have kissed her lips, but that Yorke, drawing back hurriedly, exclaimed, "Don't, pray don't!—Mr. Monteith, please take her away; and then, if you can spare me five minutes, we will get this over at once and for ever."

"O papa," said Mary, when they got into Scott's Yard, "can you understand what it all means?"

"No, my dear; but until I do understand, you had better say nothing about the result of your visit to any one. I may trust you, Mary?" he added.

And then Mary knew that Austin must have made some mistake, and that neither had Mr. Monteith proposed nor Yorke refused him.

CHAPTER XI.

SLIGHTLY TRYING.

WHEN Mr. Monteith returned to Scott's Yard, which he did almost immediately, he found Yorke seated at her needlework, precisely as Mary had discovered her. But the greeting vouchsafed to the father was very different from that accorded to the daughter.

There was no embarrassment visible in her manner now. Whatever she felt—and no one who had not known her face intimately could have told she felt at all—she suffered no trace of it to appear in word, or look, or gesture.

Once again she was the calm self-possessed woman, still fair to look upon ; who had won this old man's love, and who was utterly unconscious

that his affection for her had influenced his consent to Austin's suit.

That idea had never entered into her mind—never once. She did not know Mr. Monteith desired them all to become one united family, because then perhaps in time she would listen favourably to the words he often felt tempted to utter, and only left unspoken because he feared she still knew “too little of him,” and might answer hastily “No;” and when he returned, after seeing his daughter drive away, she had no notion that the man was dreading, for his own sake, to hear what she might have to tell lest there were something in the story which should raze his dream-castle to the ground.

“You must think all this very odd, Mr. Monteith,” Yorke began, “and I know your daughter cannot consider me other than rude and ungracious; but the interview was not of my seeking, and if she be pained, I can only say I regret she has been vexed, but that the annoyance was unavoidable.”

“I am very sorry to hear this,” he answered, “for Mary—for we all hoped a great deal from her visit; we trusted she would be able to overcome your reluctance to be friends with us, and—”

“Mr. Friars should never have allowed her to come at all,” Yorke interrupted decidedly.

“I do not think he could very well have prevented her,” Mr. Monteith said. “Mary is sometimes a wilful little puss, and she was vain enough to fancy that where I had failed, she might succeed. Further, when she proposed coming, I felt glad for her to do so—hoping, really, that her eloquence would prove effectual. You must know, Mrs. Friars, the high respect I entertain for you; and while you so resolutely refuse all friendly and social communication with us, my daughter’s approaching marriage scarcely affords me the amount of gratification which would be the case if there were any prospect of our becoming a more united family.”

“What can the presence or absence of so

unimportant a person as myself signify in a house like yours?" she asked impatiently.

"It signifies everything to me," he answered.

Swiftly and searchingly Yorke looked at the speaker to discover whether these words bore any second meaning; then she hastily retreated from the point to which they had approached, and repeated,

"Mr. Friars ought never to have allowed your daughter to come here. Rather than suffer it, he should have told you, as I tell you now, that my refusal to visit your family has not been prompted by any mere whim or fancy on my part, but by sufficient reasons which must prevent my going into society for ever."

"You surely do not expect me to understand that statement literally!" he exclaimed.

"I wish you to understand it in its fullest verbal and social sense," she replied; but she did not look at him as she spoke.

"But I cannot bear to believe, even on your own word, evil of you," he persisted. "Either I

fail to understand, or you are labouring under some delusion."

Then Yorke, facing round upon him almost desperately, answered,

"It is the truth, Mr. Monteith; it has not been a pleasant one for me to speak, but it is a right thing for you to know."

Then ensued silence for a few moments, at the end of which Mr. Monteith said:

"Considering the close relationship in which I shall shortly stand to your brother-in-law, I think I ought to have been told this before."

"I think so too," she answered; "but then the difficulty arises, 'By whom?' Theoretically, frankness is a charming attribute; practically, it is difficult either for a culprit to confess or for a friend to accuse. But now I leave the matter to Austin. Tell him from me that he is free to acquaint you with everything he knows of my life, one name alone, one that cannot in any way concern you, being suppressed. If you fear disgrace attaching to you or yours in the future through me, reassure yourself;

for I declare to you that from this day forth I shall be to you all as though I had never been."

She spoke proudly, passionately, and defiantly. Her wrongs came up and stood before her like visible presences at the moment. She beheld her vanished youth, her lost honour, her sullied purity, her useless love, the long weary years of vain sacrifice, of unavailing struggle, of devotion that had all resulted in this.

She saw a girl—this old man's child—stepping into the place which she once thought would have been hers for ever. She considered the shattered idol, she beheld its feet of clay, she had a thought for her own desolate womanhood, for her own lonely abandoned position, which enabled even these people, who had so eagerly sought her but an hour before, now she was acting honestly and fairly by them, to regard her, Yorke, as something lower than themselves.

Lower!—and the might and the strength and the passion of that woman's nature—that might and strength and passion which were all the more

intense by reason of the continual repression in which she kept all three—came and arrayed themselves on her side as she ended her sentence and flung down her gauntlet to all comers.

By virtue of her very desolation she defied society. She had nothing to lose, she had nothing to gain. The world could not give her anything, neither could it take anything away. She was free, because she had no request to prefer—no boon to crave and be refused.

In her desolation she stood erect, simply because there was nothing on which she desired to lean; and Mr. Monteith felt this, and would have given at that moment—I have said love is omnipotent, reader—all he had, all he ever hoped to have, to comfort and protect her. Out of the fulness of his heart he spoke.

“Tell me,” he said, stretching out his hands towards her, “tell me all. I want to listen to no story from Austin, but just what you choose me to hear. Say you were led astray—say you were deluded, deceived.”

“God knows I was,” she murmured.

“To me you are—you must always be—the best, the truest, the purest amongst women. Tell me what you will, provided it be that you are not to blame, and it shall rest between you and me for ever. Let me give you what you want—the shelter of a name. I am not young; but I can love you the more unselfishly, perhaps, for that. I know the world; I know its snares and its pitfalls, and I can guess, perhaps, what came to you; but I am sure of you for all that. Will you marry me? That was what I came to say this morning—that is what I even more earnestly ask now.”

Had she said “No,” he might have hoped; had she done anything save what she did—namely, cast herself on her knees, and, taking his hands, kiss them—he would have thought there existed a chance for him. But, as it was, he knew all this was but a preliminary to a final rejection—that this access of gratitude meant not a wavering purpose, but a fear of seeming ungracious.

The days were gone in which he had been able

to woo and to win, to gain smiles from women, and to make tender pulses flutter. There were women—hundreds, thousands—who would have married him still—for a purpose, with an end; but not women like Yorke Friars, whose heart ached then as much by reason of having been loved so persistently by the wrong men, as many other female hearts have ached because they were not loved by men at all.

“Sir,” she began—in the pitifulness of her self-abasement she used the word which seemed fittest to her then, not that which may appear best in print,—“sir, I have no heart to give—it is broken; I have no love—it is dead and gone—dead and gone as the youth I can recall no more. But I thank you from my soul, and say, were I free to-morrow, I would do so true a man no such dishonour as a marriage with me would entail.”

“I could give you so much,” he murmured—
“wealth, position, devotion—”

“I am grateful,” she interrupted; “but it cannot be.”

“The difference in years seems insuperable to you—” he began.

“No,” she interrupted. “The same question, ‘Will you marry me?’ was put a little while ago by a man not much older—not any older than myself—than a man should be, and my answer was the same. The tree of my life has shed all its leaves, Mr. Monteith.”

“Then let us brave the winter weather together,” he suggested.

“You had better take my first answer, and go,” she said, rising and endeavouring to withdraw her hands, which, however, he would not permit, but held them tightly, while he asked “Why?”

“Because it is not well either to ask or to answer too many questions,” she replied, with a spice of that grave coquetry which had once been a charm in Austin’s eyes.

“My dear, this is a question of life and death to me—a question as to whether my future life shall be virtually death, or whether it shall be full of a happiness I never hoped to experience, con-

ferred by you. I can believe no ill of you. I consider everything you have said this morning to be the result of morbid brooding—of an over-sensitive conscience. I should not love you as I do, if I could not love you still, no matter what may have happened.”

He was contradicting himself, and she knew it; but the man's chivalry and the man's devotion touched her as she had never thought to be touched by such words again. He felt her hand tremble a little, while it lay passive in his own. She had released the other, and as it toyed nervously with the lace and the net lying on the table, he noticed that one ring he had often observed on her finger was gone, and that nothing save the plain broad gold band remained.

Something in the sight of her wedding-ring suggested his next remark.

“If you married very young, not knowing your own mind, and that unhappiness arose in consequence, the very fact of Austin's stanch friendship

for you proves there cannot have been any grave error on your side. I never heard a man speak in higher terms of a woman than he speaks of you; and your offer to let him tell me all he knows of your life shows you do not really fear what any one may have to say about you."

"I do not fear now," she answered slowly; "not for myself; but I should fear, if I had anything to lose—if the name of a good man could be tarnished through the misery of my past—if I left a life which is at least safe in its obscurity, and went out into that world which years ago I voluntarily renounced for ever."

"But you lived in the same house with your brother-in-law; and supposing he had become a very rich and a very prosperous man—"

"I should have left him," she interrupted. "I always meant to do that. So long as I was useful to him, so long as he had need of me, so long as I was a help instead of a drag, I did not care; but the moment he grew wealthy and achieved success, I was always resolved never to pull him

back. He has achieved success, and you see I am able to carry out my intention."

"But if you were wealthy, too—if you were the wife of a rich man, who would give you the devotion of his life—"

"If I had all the money in the Mint," she replied—"if I were the wife of a prince, it could make no difference to me now; it could not undo the past or mend the future, or make me what I was in the old days before I ever saw you, or thought I should ever receive such kindness from any one. I know well enough what you mean, of course. You want me, spite of all, to be your wife. You think your name, your position, your wealth, would form barriers strong enough to prevent people saying much evil of me—at all events you are content to try the experiment; but it cannot be. Even were I mean enough to let you marry me, it cannot be."

"Why?" — he drew her towards him as he repeated this word, and looked pitifully in her face, which was white and troubled, in

her eyes, which were full of tears—"why, my dear?"

"I have a husband living," she said; then cried out, "O Mr. Monteith, you will not make any use of what I have now told!"

He was more shaken even than she, for this was a death-blow to all his hopes; but he had strength enough to keep from adding to her grief.

"Trust me," he answered; "and go on—tell me all. You have a husband living—Austin's brother?"

"Do not ask me to say more," she pleaded. "I want to tell you nothing but the truth, and I must not trust any one except myself."

"Was he cruel to you?" he whispered.

"Cruel, no," she replied; "he is as good and true a man as you. He would have stood between me and harm; he would have saved me from myself, had I only trusted and known him as I do now; but I was young—so young; and—and you know all now that I can tell you."

"Only one word more," Mr. Monteith said

sadly ; “as I cannot be your husband, confide in me as you might in your father were he living.”

“He may still be living,” she answered ; “but whether he be or not cannot now signify to me. It was my father wrought all this misery. I hope I have forgiven him ; I have tried to do so ; but I trust—I pray that we may never meet again.”

“Poor soul !” was all his comment ; and there ensued a pause broken only by the sobs Yorke could not restrain, and the noise of Mr. Montèith’s boots as he walked up and down the small room, with head bent and hands clasped behind his back. She was praying that she might never have to go through anything like this again so long as she lived. He was thinking over the story he had just heard, and considering whether he could not render the future better for her—whether it would not be possible to make the man—that vague man—whose name he did not know, but whom he strongly suspected to be Austin’s brother, marry her.

“I do not wish to ask any question that it may

be painful for you to answer," he began at length, stopping close to where she sat; "but if you were divorced, would the person to whom you have referred not make you his wife?"

"I do not know—I do not think so," she replied; "but I do know this—that, if he stood at this moment where you stand, and said to me, 'I will make you a duchess, I will give you all the land from here to Cornwall, if you will only marry me,' I would not be his wife—no, not even if he could give me back my youth and my innocence with it."

"Did he treat you so badly?"

"No. He treated me perhaps better than I deserved; but the old trustful love that once made sin itself seem sweet is dead, and can never come to life more."

"This is very sad," he murmured almost to himself; "it is very hard."

"It has been," she replied, "but the sadness is gone almost; and it is only your kindness which has now made me feel it hard for a moment. I

have spoken," she went on more hurriedly, "freely, and as few women, perhaps, might have cared to do; but you wanted the truth, and you know now why the proffer of your daughter's friendship tortured me; why your own goodness wrung from me a confession I never thought to have to make again."

"You will let me see you sometimes," he suggested.

"I would rather not," she answered; "I want to bury my past, and the sight of any one who knows—who has been told—would only dig it up again. Do not think me ungrateful," she added, "but you cannot imagine, it is impossible for you to know, all I have suffered, and—justly."

"If ever you want a friend," he entreated, "let me be that friend, will you?"

"If ever I see any way in which you can serve me, I will come to you," she answered evasively.

"Good-bye, then, my dear," he said, and his voice shook just for a moment, and he clasped her hand, which he had once hoped might have been

given to him for life ; “good-bye, and do not forget that promise.”

She could not speak, but she went to the top of the staircase with him, and there they parted.

Almost unconsciously she leant over the broad old-fashioned balustrade, and watched him as he slowly descended step by step. When he got half way down the last flight, he looked up, and, seeing her face, waved his hand mournfully.

Then Yorke, returning to her sitting-room, covered her face, and wept tears that were to the poor, weary, desert heart as rain falling upon dry parched ground.

She was sorry for Mr. Monteith, as she had never thought to be sorry for man or woman again. She had been the hope of an existence that had few personal hopes left, and in a dim sort of way she realised that the man looked ten years older as he crept down the staircase, and that the face which had looked up to meet hers belonged to one who felt his steps must henceforth wander solitary along the wintry ways of life.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DENOUEMENT.

WHEN Yorke told Mr. Monteith that she now left the matter in Mr. Friars' hands, and that he was at liberty to tell what he knew of her history, her words were not uttered rashly; for long before she had come to the conclusion it would be better and happier both for Austin and herself if all attempt at deception were abandoned, and Mary's father understood what had been the unhappy link which bound them together.

Instinctively she felt that the day must come when some kind friend would publish both the secret of Austin's birth and the nature of the tie which had existed between her and himself, and she resolved to give him the chance, at all

events, of making a full and free confession should he be disposed to do so.

Not forgetting this intention, even among the crowd of bitter thoughts that succeeded to Mr. Monteith's departure, she wrote a note to Austin, which ran as follows, and which she intrusted to the only errand-boy of the establishment, with strict injunctions to deliver it into Mr. Friars' own hands before the day was over:

"The interview I dreaded, and that I think you could and might have spared me, is over.

"In the course of it I told Mr. Monteith he could ask you any question he wished concerning my past life, you being at perfect liberty to answer him. I do not think he will seek such explanation from you; but should he make any inquiries, remember you are to understand my permission literally. These people are too good, too true, too high-minded, to be deceived and deluded by either of us, and it might prove better for you hereafter if you dealt frankly and straightforwardly with them now. Once more I repeat I do not

think he will ask you any question, and that I believe the choice whether you tell him everything or not rests entirely with yourself."

In reply to this there came next morning a note containing these words:

"You are, as you always were, a romantic little simpleton. I have no intention of destroying either your prospects or my own. *Remember, I believe your chance is still open to you, though I am glad—selfishly—you did not take it.* It is not easy to forget, is it, Yorke?"

"No," she murmured bitterly, while she tore the epistle to pieces and flung it into the fire. "Would it were—would it were! what a heaven life might be, but for its memories!"

Memories, however, whether sad or pleasant, were not luxuries, as Luke Ross speedily took occasion to tell her, in which busy people could indulge *ad libitum*. And indeed, when once Austin Friars finally moved his offices from Scott's Yard and left the "conspirators," which was the name by which he subsequently alluded to Yorke

and Ross, free to commence their operations also, she had but little time to spend in vain regrets, in unavailing repentance.

Busy people are not, as a rule, sorry people ; and soon after it was publicly announced that Austin Friars, Esq., only son of the late Alfred A. Friars, Esq., of Bermuda, had married Mary Alice, only daughter of John Monteith, Esq., Manchester Square, and Leadenhall Street, City, Yorke began to find that the present occupied her so fully that she had little leisure to brood over the past which was as irremediable as it had once been full to overflowing both of grief and of joy.

At seven-and-twenty—whether men and women have been saints, or whether they have been sinners—they do not die of broken hearts, provided always that their minds are fairly healthy and their constitutions sound—and in spite of all her trouble, there was no fear of Yorke either turning back from the purpose she had formed, or flinching from executing it.

“We are both in the boat now,” Luke was wont

laughingly to remind her, "and we must try to bring it into a safe harbour;" which sentiment was greatly echoed and applauded by an old friend, Mrs. Suthers — the only female friend, indeed, Yorke possessed in the world, and who, to the great relief of Luke's propriety, but frequently also to the chagrin of his affection, had been introduced as a resident into Scott's Yard.

"I have considered your scruples and pondered your words, and had regard to the social exigencies of my position," Yorke observed. "It is a great pleasure to me to have Mrs. Suthers, who has always been my good friend, living here, and *she knows everything.*"

"The worst friend she ever had, Mr. Ross, believe me," privately said the lady, who was elderly and wore hideous caps, and employed herself in continual knitting, which seemed to Luke's fancy as eternal and remorseless as that weaving with which the Fates entertain themselves. "If, instead of listening to her folly and helping her to hide away from her husband, I had acted like a

sensible woman, and written to him where she could be found, she might have been now one of the happiest and most honoured women in the land ; but I loved the child, and she trusted in me, and my own married life had not proved prosperous, and I thought Yorke would tire of work and go back to him some day. I could not foresee, could I, Mr. Ross ?”

“ No ; but it is never wise to ignore the possibility of a human being falling in love with the wrong person,” Luke answered.

“ That is very true, indeed,” remarked Mrs. Suthers ; but all the time it never occurred to her to imagine Luke had fallen in love with the wrong person, or to conceive it possible that he, knowing, like herself, everything, could still desire to make Yorke his wife.

And yet to do so was the settled desire of the man’s heart. From the time when she refused him—when she told him all her story—he had vowed that if he could not have her he would never marry another woman.

A lover had stood in the way—a husband did ; but, nevertheless, Luke was steadfastly purposed, either that some day he would wed Yorke, or never wed at all. He had hesitated about asking her ; he had imagined once that the gift of his honest name was almost more than he had a right to offer to a woman whose antecedents were, to say the least, questionable ; but now he simply bided his time, for he knew her at last so well, he understood so entirely the passion of love he felt for her, the unselfish devotion of which she was capable, that he comprehended if Yorke were but his he could defy the world and its troubles, whereas, without Yorke, the rank and the wealth and the honours of the world would come to him all in vain.

Then ensued the happiest days Luke had ever known ; days of sunshine within, though the wind howled and raved through the churchyard, and the rain pelted down in torrents, and the snow lay deep on the graves ; days when he saw Yorke continually without any unwelcome presence in-

truding between them; when he beheld the sorrow wearing a little off her face, and the very mental ease he was enabled to give her bringing back something of the brightness that had been wont to flash out occasionally in the days when he knew her first, and learnt to consider even the very ground she walked upon as something sacred and apart.

The work he found to do was up-hill and anxious, but he never feared work, and he soon saw that Yorke had been right; that there was a business, and a good one, to be made, after the manner in which she suggested. Without money they might have tried for ever in vain to resuscitate a dying connection, to bring back life into that almost defunct concern, but Mr. Foulke had sought Austin, who never found time to call on him, and having given that gentleman clearly to understand he meant to have no delay in the matter, got his acceptances for the amount borrowed from Yorke—which acceptances Luke and he found no difficulty in discounting when once it

was clearly understood that the A. Friars who signed them was the A. Friars of Monteith, Friars, & Co., Leadenhall Street.

The only trouble Luke had at that time was the impossibility of spending every evening and every Sunday with Yorke and Mrs. Suthers. Occasionally Yorke asked him to remain for a little time after office-work was over ; and frequently Mrs. Suthers wondered that he never cared to go to Westminster Abbey, or St. Paul's, or the Foundling (Ritualism was then an infant in arms, which even its mother did not dream of dressing up in its present gorgeous apparel), or to any other of those places of religious entertainment that Mrs. Suthers devoutly believed she earned a right to attend on Sunday afternoons by appearing regularly each Sunday morning at what she called "Our parish church"—namely, St. Swithin's, Cannon Street.

Well enough—better indeed than Mrs. Suthers or Yorke was able to guess—he would have liked to remain after office-hours, and to go to every church in London with the woman who looked

so much prettier and daintier in her quiet dress than any other woman he had ever beheld; but Luke Ross was afraid. The drop of gall in his cup chanced to be dread of detection from the females of his family. As another man might have feared the power of an employer, or the bullying of a manager, or the taunt of a bailiff, or a reminder about that little affair of So-and-so, which happened half a lifetime previously; so Luke Ross lived in torment lest by any chance Mrs. Holmes should discover he had left Hurward & Gaskarth and gone into business with Yorke Friars. About such matters men are often awful cowards, and perhaps the reason for this may be that they know so well the terrible bitterness of women's tongues.

Behold the Rev. Mr. St. Paul, who tells his flock so plainly his opinion of their shortcomings, who denounces sin and weakness and all pleasant foibles, all human frailty, who is a perfect Goliath of pulpit eloquence, and who minds no more whom he offends than he cares whom he

conciliates—behold him, I say, returning after service to the bosom of his family, and being “nagged” by Mrs. St. P., to whose strictures he never replies a word. See the man, who is remorseless in business, who exacts his pound of flesh to the letter, who is relentless as regards writs, and thinks no more of insisting that a man shall board and lodge against his will for a time in the City hotel than you, dear reader, would of asking a friend to dinner; see him meekly eating cold meat for supper, and afraid of remonstrating against underdone mutton, lest his wife should assure him, with that indirect satire which is so strong a weapon in the hands of the sex, that even raw sheep is beyond his deserts. Consider a “navvy,” strong as an ox and big as an elephant, being walked out of his temporal heaven—the public-house—by a little wasp of a creature, who goads the large animal till, in very desperation, he turns and employs his huge strength in a manner which draws down upon him the animadversion of the sitting magistrate. Observe the woman who

waits outside the factory-gate on pay-days, that she may secure the wages worked for in the sweat of the man's brow—see her insist on a general turn-out of his pockets at night, that she may annex also the gratuity she believes was given to him, and a portion of which has already been spent in beer.

Take heed to all these things, and then you will know with me that though Luke Ross was not afraid of what men could do to him, he was yet horribly in dread of what women might say if only it came to their hearing that he had left Rood Lane, and was spending eight hours a day in Scott's Yard.

Of course, as the intelligent reader has already mentally remarked, he was very foolish to attempt any reserve of the kind, considering that, sooner or later, deception must be discovered, and the storm break—which is all very true—only the strongest and wisest men are weak and foolish with regard to the real powers that be, and further, even if this were not so, men, unlike women, prefer later than sooner as a convenient time for

“rowing.” Like a war-horse to the battle rushes the female mind burdened with a grievance; but the men hold back their forces to the last moment, and have no desire for “Greek to meet Greek” till the fight can no longer be deferred.

But at last the time for the fight came in Pelham Terrace, and it came in this wise.

The tea-table was spread in Church Street punctually at six; every evening it had been spread, so that fact, just chronicled, was nothing singular. For years the tray had been placed upon the table, and the bright copper kettle put beside the fire, punctually at ten minutes to six, at which period Miss Melinda Holmes went through a ceremony called by her mamma “wetting the tea,” the result whereof proved that, by the time Luke had changed his coat and washed his hands, the cheering cup, prepared for his delectation, was black as ink and bitter as gall.

It is with diffidence I make the foregoing statement, since this system of brewing tea is still considered by many worthy people as necessary to the

well-being of a respectably-conducted and regular household as antimacassars and holland covers ; but to understand a man, to arrive at a clear comprehension of the ins and outs of his character, it is necessary that some explanation should be offered concerning those trifling circumstances, those social surroundings, which have gone to form that character, or at least compelled a nature, that might otherwise have proved original and independent, to run along a particular line of rail, to conform itself unconsciously, so to speak, to the ideas, habits, manners, and prejudices of those amongst whom its daily life is cast.

And, after all, the wonderful punctuality of Luke's household, the utter monotony of that singular establishment, and his own equally methodical mode of existence, were bidding fair to turn the man into a mere machine when first he met Yorke Friars, and learnt in the sunshine of her home, darkened though that sunshine might be with the overshadowing presence of a great sorrow and a great sin, something of the blessed-

ness of a life in which mind takes precedence of mere matter; in which the whole of daily happiness does not consist in "sitting down regularly to meals" after getting through a certain amount of needful but disagreeable work, but in that rest and talk following appointed labour, which renders the most frugal repast as appetising as the richest banquet, and the modest tumbler of "bitter" more to be desired than wines of the choicest vintages, if quaffed at the tables of some we know, who with true hospitality press the draught upon us, and think to increase our enjoyment by stating in the same breath "what it cost."

To return, however—if one may borrow a favourite phrase from the modern pulpit—to the domestic hearth and tea-table at Mrs. Holmes's. For years, as has been said, the latter had been set punctually at 5.50; and at six for years likewise—excepting on Saturdays, when he returned home at five, and on those rare occasions of unwonted dissipation, when he went anywhere with a friend—a thing he never did, however, unless

due warning were given beforehand to his family belongings, or an explanatory message sent to Homerton, calculated to allay their natural apprehensions—Luke Ross had sat down to receive a cup of that beverage which Miss Melinda made out of five spoonfuls of tea in a Britannia-metal pot, and duly kept from the chilly encroachments of the outer air by covering with an elaborately-worked and amply-wadded “cosy.”

Had any one suggested to Mrs. Holmes—which, however, no one ever did—that it might be pleasanter for Luke to dine when he returned from the City than to regale himself on stale bread, Dorset butter, and watercresses when in season, that dear old lady would have regarded such a suggestion as a first step on the road to ruin.

Late dinners Mrs. Holmes’s unprejudiced mind esteemed immoral—institutions only to be found in the homes of those bad managers who “never went into their kitchens,” and habitually let their servants do “just what they liked.” Further,

Mrs. Holmes considered late dinners uncomfortable inventions. "Give me supper," she said; "I had rather do without any other meal in the day." And, accordingly, early teas obtained, and perfectly satisfied Luke, though he returned home every evening with a sufficient appetite, that had been whetted rather than satisfied by the meagre luncheon City folks have to put up with, and eat, like the Israelites, in haste, as well as frequently standing.

Contentedly, however, the man accepted what was set before him, grateful also for the occasional "relish" Mrs. Holmes, in the plenitude of her housekeeping generosity, provided; that is to say, he had accepted the goods the domestic gods sent with a quiet mind till he knew Yorke Friars.

After that lamentable event, when he was munching muffins, or contemplating the first dish of young radishes tastefully arranged amongst the greenery of mustard-and-cress by his cousin Kate, his thoughts acquired a bad habit of wandering back to Scott's Yard and a little quiet

sitting-room, where Austin Friars' custom was to regale himself with coffee, and bid Luke partake likewise.

Such coffee! the man always considered it must have been just such nectar that Eve prepared for Adam's refreshment, before they got mutually tired of the conjugal *tête-à-tête*, and tried whether *ennui* could not be dissipated by conversing even with a serpent.

While his outward eyes watched his aunt gloomily devouring toast, the crusts of which she soaked in her tea, and took in Kate, patiently waiting for the proposal he never made, and Melinda, grimly conscious of the sternest domestic rectitude, even to the minutest inquiry concerning dripping and other matters their maid-of-all-work regarded as lawful perquisites, Luke's mental vision took cognisance of a flitting graceful figure—of soft white hands—of a sweet face that lighted up when another, not he, entered the room—of a wealth of wreathed and shining brown hair—of a face, pale and sad though it might be,

still fairer to him than any other woman's could ever seem throughout all the years to come.

Soon after the period when Luke began to dream dreams and see visions, Mrs. Holmes and Melinda began to see a change in Luke—a change, as they considered, not for the better, and which they attributed entirely to the influence of “that woman,” who was no doubt trying to alienate him from his friends and secure him for herself.

Holding these opinions, the delight with which both ladies greeted the intelligence that he had parted company with Austin Friars may readily be conceived; but their delight was somewhat damped when they discovered, as the months rolled by, that although Luke had left Scott's Yard, the Luke of old never returned to them.

“His light-heartedness was gone,” so Mrs. Holmes pathetically remarked—though light-heartedness was certainly not the word any one with the slightest idea of the meaning of language would have applied to Luke Ross. “It was an

evil day," she often stated, "when he first set foot in Mr. Friars' office. He has never been the same since." Which was quite true, though whether other people besides Mrs. Holmes would have considered the change matter for regret, is open to question.

After a long time, however, the family began to notice further alterations in Luke. More suddenly than he had lost his cheerfulness, it returned to him again. If he were not so charming as formerly in the domestic circle in the evening, he, at all events, looked always immensely happy when he started for the City. He became extravagant in the matter of clothes, and somewhat hypercritical as regarded his cousins' dress. He did not affect so much as formerly the society of his neighbours, and of those numerous friends who were naturally attracted to his home by the courtesy of Mrs. Holmes, the charms of her daughters, and the potency of Luke's strong drinks; rather, as the spring advanced, he began to indulge in solitary walks and country rambles

—frequently he went to the theatre alone—and so often took omnibus and proceeded Cityward at unusual hours in the evening, that Mrs. Holmes' fears became excited, and "I only hope," she said, "he is not getting in with a lot of those fast men, and beginning to play at billiards."

"I think Luke is getting tired of Homerton," remarked Kate. "I heard him saying the other day to Mr. Brooke, that he was thoroughly sick of the journey in and out."

"It is that woman," exclaimed Melinda; "if you will only consider, all this change has come about since the evening when he got that letter."

And things had arrived at the state indicated before the day on which, as previously stated, the tray was set in Pelham Terrace. Melinda had made the tea, and her mother, dressed out in the most elaborate manner, with her best cap well placed on her head, her finest lace frills and cuffs duly tacked into her stiffest silk gown, her gold chain displayed to the fullest advantage, came into the room.

“Melinda,” she said, mournfully, “you had better have some of those new-laid eggs boiled, and that honeycomb and the home-made loaf brought in.”

Eggs, honeycomb, and home-made loaf being all intended as so many coals of live fire, which were to be placed on the head of Mr. Luke Ross, at that moment admitted by his cousin Kate, who whispered, “O Luke, you are in for it.”

“In for what?” he asked.

But Kate, in reply, only put her finger to her lips and looked in the direction of the parlour-door, while Luke, as was his wont, went upstairs in order to wash his hands and change his coat ere descending to partake of that meal which, whether it cheered or not, certainly did not inebriate him.

“I wonder what is up,” he mentally considered as he brushed his hair, “and whether the old lady has heard anything.”

Then remembering that if he did not go down he should never know what was the matter, and further, whether he wished it or not, the position

would have to be faced some time, Luke, putting on his most unconcerned expression, descended the staircase and entered the dining-room, where were eggs, the honeycomb, the loaf, the tea, Mrs. Holmes, Miss Melinda, and Miss Kate.

“What fine eggs!” Luke remarked, by way of seeming at his ease. “Where did you get them?”

“Mrs. Manners brought them to me as a present,” his aunt replied.

“Has Mrs. Manners been here to-day?” he inquired.

“Yes, and she was sorry not to see you.”

“I am very sorry too; I like Mrs. Manners very much.”

“It is well some of our friends still please you,” observed Mrs. Holmes.

“I think they all please me well enough—as well as ever they did,” Luke answered, with wonderful courage, considering his was a trying position for even the bravest of mankind to be placed in.

He could not imagine what was the matter

but he knew well enough he was sitting there to be shot at—as arranged—by one woman, while two others were looking silently on.

In order to break their ranks if possible, he therefore said, addressing his elder cousin :

“ Will you give me some more tea, please, Melinda, and without any sugar ?”

At that juncture something happened which was quite outside all Luke’s former experiences.

With a terrible severity, Mrs. Holmes took the teapot and poured out a second cup for him. Then Luke knew for certain he had done something very wrong indeed, for which he should presently be brought up before the domestic tribunal.

END OF VOL. I.





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